



H

OMESPUN

Thirty-seventh Thousand.

HOMESPUN:

A STUDY OF A SIMPLE FOLK.

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN.

(MRS. BURNETT-SMITH),

AUTHOR OF "A BITTER DEBT," "A FOOLISH MARRIAGE," "COURTSHIP AND
MARRIAGE," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

London, 1894:

HUTCHINSON & CO.,

34, PATERNOSTER ROW.



JEANIE.

PRINTED BY
HAZELL, WATSON, AND VINEY, LD.,
LONDON AND AYLESBURY.

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. A BEILD QUARTETTE . . .	7
II. BIG SANDY LOSES . . .	15
III. NANSE'S WEIRD . . .	22
IV. MARGET BROON'S NEWS . . .	30
V. TAKING COUNSEL . . .	39
VI. DOD CRIES OFF . . .	48
VII. A NOBLE SOUL . . .	57
VIII. SUNDAY AFTERNOON . . .	65
IX. ACROSS THE RUBICON . . .	73
X. MORE SORE HEARTS . . .	82
XI. FRSKINE NICOLL'S TRIALS . . .	93
XII. YOUNG AMBITION . . .	103

CHAP.	PAGE
XIII. BRUCE UNDERSTANDS . . .	114
XIV. SORROW IN STRATHAIRN . . .	124
XV. MISS DEMPSTER'S EXTREMITY . . .	136
XVI. THE MARRYING OF DOD AITKEN . . .	148
XVII. LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM . . .	159
XVIII. GOOD-BYE	170

HOMESPUN.

CHAPTER I.

A BEILD QUARTETTE.

ABOUT nine o'clock on a summer evening four Beild worthies forgathered in Bawbie Windrum's public, and there sat down to have a nip and a crack. Bawbie herself, a fearsome-looking old hag, with a big, clean, white mutch which made her coarse, large-featured face seem even less comely than usual, sat knitting in her corner of the bar, hard by the till, which was her chief concern in this world, whatever it might be in the next.

It was a poor sort of bar, though many a Beild body got "fou" standing in it; the whole hostelry indeed was unpretentious in the extreme. It consisted of a but and ben, the "but" being Bawbie's living room, the "ben" a taproom provided with a long table and wooden benches on either side of it. The stone floor was sanded, and though fairly clean smelled evilly, very doubtful tobacco being smoked perpetually

therein. It had no decorations, unless two china dogs on the mantelpiece could be called such; and it had one picture on the yellow-ochred wall—a highly coloured likeness of Burns' Highland Mary with four lines of poetry beneath. The window was very small, the panes of that knotted greenish glass which you never see anywhere but in the Beild and places like it; on this account no blind was required, as it would have taken a very sharp-eyed person to see through it. It had been tried often by Leebie Morison looking for her man, before she actually went in to fetch him out. He was there that night, one of the four; but I shall return to the company presently, when I have told you about the house.

The bar was converted out of a closet between the two rooms, and had a wide bole, as they called it—that is, an opening over a little counter into the passage. Between the narrow counter and the back shelves, on which stood sundry bottles and a glass barrel, of which Bawbie was particularly proud, there was just sufficient space for Bawbie's stool; and there she sat from morn till night knitting for dear life, when not drawing in the coppers, and ready for all the gossip of the countryside. She had a fine vantage-ground on her stool, as it was just opposite the door; she saw everything that passed, and some things that didn't. She would not have sat so constantly in one spot perhaps, being of an active temperament, only she was a hope-

less cripple, and it took her all her time to hirple from her kitchen to the bar and back again. But don't think because Bawbie was a cripple that she was not a capable and exacting manager. What she lacked in bodily activity was made up in mental; some went the length of saying she was not canny. She was assisted in her management of the public by a cousin of her own, a middle-aged woman, of no particular parts, physical or mental, which perhaps was quite as well, it being certain no small house could have held two beings of Bawbie's type.

Bawbie was wont to allude to Kirsty Todd as "donert," and never spared her tongue over her, but she knew very well that she was a patient, honest, painstaking creature, who served her purpose well. Kirsty's appearance was as colourless as her character and lot; she was a long limp person, of cadaverous aspect, with black hair plastered smoothly over her temples and screwed into a tight knot behind. She invariably wore a short wincey gown and a blue check apron, tied loosely round her waist with a cotton tape. She did all the work of the establishment and got no thanks, but appeared to be contented with her lot. There was no other open to her anyhow—as she had no relative in the world besides Bawbie, whose constant fault-finding had never been known to ruffle her in the smallest degree.

It was an extraordinary wet night, which perhaps accounted for the unusually slack time Bawbie was having in the public, and

her grim face momentarily brightened when the four worthies crossed the step.

"Beer, Kirsty, fower hauf pints!" she cried out. "Stap in, neebors—it's a fell nicht o' rain, but it'll gar the neeps grow. Kirsty, whaur are ye? Deil tak' the 'ooman; she's never here when she's wanted. Screw up the lamp yersel', Sandy, an' mak' yersel's at hame."

"A' richt, Bawbie, a' richt; we're no in a hurry," said Sandy soothingly, and they passed into the room—Sandy first, with his lumbering figure, his red head and large soft face, which had no particular expression and generally looked rather vacant. Sandy, however, was by no means vacant, though easy-minded and inclined to "idle-set," as Beild folk had it. His lack of energy was, however, supplemented by the fierce activity of Leeby his wife, who was never at her ease five minutes at a time and could hardly take time to sleep in her bed at night.

There were two Sandy Morisons in the Beild, cousins, and they were very chief; Leeby's man was usually called Big Sandy, and his cousin, who was unmarried, and abode with his father and mother, who had a dairy, Wee Sandy. Wee Sandy drove the milk-cart twice a day on a long round right down to the sea, and was never free till after milking-time at night. Everybody employed at Morison's dairy had to work for dear life and be content with small pay. In addition to the cows, the Morisons kept several pauper lunatics, who considerably

added to their income. And terrible stories went through the Beild as to how the poor creatures were treated, having to work harder than any hired person would do, and being fed but jimply. But the Beild was so full of gossip and scandal, that though everybody repeated and believed the tales, they treated the Morisons civilly, for they had siller, and were rather big folk all round.

Wee Sandy, being sole heir to all the gear, was considered rather a catch by Beild lassies, though he was ill conditioned in body and mind, besides being eaten up with conceit of himself. Besides the two Morisons there were Jeems Tamson, a weaver from the head of the Raw—a sociable, genial soul, an old bachelor, and fell fond of a glass, but good company always when under its influence; and Dod Aitken, another weaver, though precious little he wove, being a ne'er-do-weel in every sense of the word, and considered by the majority to be wanting in gumption. He certainly had the look of a wandered soul, but had sufficient sense to manage his own concerns, and some even said he had money laid by in a stocking-foot and had been seen counting it out at night like a miser. He lived quite alone, as so many bachelor men did in the Beild, and made his own porridge and his kale and tea, even cleaning up his own house when it was cleaned, which was seldom. In his way Dod was a character, godless, graceless, and forlorn; yet he had some redeeming points, and was sought after by

sociable souls because of his good-nature and his joking turn, which enlivened the company he happened to be in. He was not much given to drink, and when he visited Bawbie's never paid for himself.

Big Sandy lit the lamp and set it down in the middle of the table, and presently Kirsty Todd appeared with a big jug of beer and four mugs, which she set down on the table without saying a word. She never spoke to customers, even if she had known them for years—by some considered a virtue, by others a failing.

The four were in a rollicking mood, and ready for a joke at anybody's expense, but Kirsty Todd, with her yellow face and lank hair, acted as a kind of wet blanket on them, and they suffered her to depart in silence.

"Fegs!" said Big Sandy. "A man micht dae waur than tak' Kirsty Todd. There wad be peace in the house at least."

And there was a shade of regret in his face as he recollected sundry cutting phrases with which Leeby his spouse had driven him that night from the fireside; and all because he, being a weaver also, would not start that very night to the new web he had carried all the way from Cairndrum on his shoulder.

"Eh, michty," said Dod Aitken, as he took a long draught from his mug, "I wadna like to tackle Kirsty Todd. As weel a'maist be tied till a corp, an' bide in the kirkyaird."

This poor sally of course provoked a roar of laughter; and presently Wee Sandy, looking earnestly at Dod, with rather a mis-

chievous gleam in his small bleared eyes, asked a question,—

"I say, Dod, ye've never yet telt us what way ye hinna mairret. Had ye ever a lass?"

Dod gave his greasy old bonnet a push back to the angle of his head, and his ill-favoured face assumed a particularly knowing look.

"Ay, a guid wheen—mair than ye wad think. But I'm no to be drawn on that pint. There's some things a man keeps to himsel'."

"But, Dod, tell's what way ye hinna mairret," pursued Wee Sandy, and gave a chap on the table which indicated to Kirsty Todd that the beer was done, and she could fetch in the whisky.

"As weel ask Jeems Tamson as me," said Dod rather slily; but nobody did ask Jeems, and they even felt, rude and uncouth though they were, that it was a perfectly uncalled-for remark, which nobody but a daft gomeril like Dod would have made. For everybody in the Beild knew Jeems Tamson's early love-story—how he had been engaged to Katie Christie, and how she had died before she was twenty; also how true he had been to her memory, never looking at another woman.

"Are ye on for a ploy, lads?" said Big Sandy presently. "Tak' anither dram, Dod—as langs it's guid. Bawbie's bottle hasna touched it yet."


This was an allusion to Bawbie's reported habit of adulterating her whisky with vitriol

when her customers were too far gone to recognise it.

Thus admonished Dod took a particularly big dram, and then inquired in a voice already growing a trifle thick what was the nature of the "ploy."

CHAPTER II.

BIG SANDY LOSES.

"PEAKIN' about matrimony," said Big Sandy Morison, "d'ye no think it a peety that a sociable body like Dod shouldna get a sonsy wife? Dod man, is there naebody in the Beild fit enough for the honour o' becomin' Mrs. Dod Aitken?"

"Oo ay, maybe there's ane or twa, but I'm no in a hurry. I'll wale cannily, syne I'll mak' nae mistak'."

Big Sandy gave a wink to Wee Sandy and Jeems. Dod was getting into the talkative stage, and some fun might be extracted from him.

"Ye see," said Dod wisely, "matrimony's no like ony ither seetuation—ye canna quit if ye're no pleased, though there's some that we've heard tell o' that speak o'd whiles."

He alluded to Big Sandy, who sometimes, in the heat of a domestic broil, had threatened to leave his spouse and fend for himself.

"If it's me ye're meanin', Dod, speak out like a man," said Big Sandy, with dignity. "I hev said I wad gang back to my ain

fireside when Leeby was extra thrawn, but it's easier said than done. But come, Dod, tell's wha in the Beild ye wad think guid enough to speir?"

Dod, however, declined to be drawn, and then Big Sandy, who had a plot in his head, threw out a suggestion.

"I ken a ledgy that wadna hae to be speirt twice," he said. "But I'll mention nae names."

"Will ye no?" inquired Dod. "Then ye can haud your tongue," said Dod calmly, and proceeded to chap on the table again. Kirsty was rather longer coming this time, and there were some mysterious sounds proceeding from Bawbie's corner which indicated that she was at the mixing process. She was interrupted, however, by a baker's man stopping his van at the door, to get a nip to keep him warm in his wet clothes till he got home.

"I'll bet ye half a sovereign, Dod," said Big Sandy, "that there's wan 'ooman in the Beild wad pull yer nose till ye, if ye said marriage till her."

"I dinna ken her," said Dod, anxiously regarding the door for the entrance of Kirsty. "An' I dinna believe either there's a wummin born in the Beild or out o' it that wadna jump at a man like a cock at a berry."

"Wad ye tried, Dod?" queried Big Sandy slily. "Supposin' I mentioned names, wad ye prove yer word?"

"I wadna be feart," said Dod, and Kirsty entering then he took another dram.

"But she's a ledgy o' property this, a relation o' mine by marriage."

"Are ye meanin' Marget Broon, Leeby's sister?" queried Jeems mildly; and at that Dod Aitken broke into a derisive laugh.

"Marget Broon! oh, I could 'a' haen her for the speirin' lang syne. She's no that ill-faured, but they say she has a deil o' a temper; though she has siller, hasn't she, Sandy?"

"Ay, plenty. I'll lay that half-sovereign an' a dram on tap o't that she'd chase ye out o' the door, an' gie ye a dishclood aboot yer legs. She biles her dishclood though, so she micht think mair o' it than clood Dod's lugs wi' it. Will ye tak' it up?"

"Oo ay, I'll speir her the morn; but if she tak's me, I'll no mairly her mind—I'll rin awa' first."

"If Marget says ay to you, Dod, we may a' rin awa', for the Judgment Day'll no be faur off!" said Sandy. "But I dinna think ye should wait or the mornin'; ye see I hev the hauf-soverin' in my pooch the day—I took my wab back to Cairndrum an' kept hauf a sovereign to mysel'. Tak' my advice an' gang the nicht."

"A' richt," said Dod, rising a trifle unsteadily to his feet. "An' if she tak's me mind, Sandy, ye'll explain that it was only a joke. I'm no gaunna be tied to Marget Broon."

"Oh, I'll explain," said Sandy readily; and the trio, entering into the joke, got up, ready to accompany the wooer to his destination. He was a sorry-looking object in

his old moleskin trousers and ragged jacket, minus a collar, and an old tartan scarf knotted round his scraggy neck. The three worthies promised themselves some fun if he actually carried out his present purpose and offered himself to Marget Broon, who owned her own croft and cottage, and was a person of strong character, who thought no end of herself. It still rained heavily when they got out of doors, and it was pitch dark, a stray gleam here and there from an uncurtained cottage window occasionally relieving the gloom. The Beild ran east and west in a straggling fashion, and had some by-ways, which would lead to a solitary house, with maybe its byre and pigstye attached, and would there stop; streets it had none, though its denizens spoke of it as "the toon." The peat moss was the starting-point. If you walked away from it, you went east; if towards, west.

The four worthies walked east, Marget Broon's cottage being at the extreme end of the Beild, close by the smiddy and across the road from Morison's dairy. They did not meet a soul as they walked, and by the time they reached the east end were pretty wet; but what did that matter with such a ploy on. They did not believe Dod would ever do it—indeed, Big Sandy quite expected him to slink into his own house, which they had to pass on their way; but Dod had no such intention. He meant to win the half-sovereign, and to prove the truth of his assertion that any woman could be had for the asking. Big Sandy began

to get a little nervous as they approached Marget's abode, but Dod was quite composed.

"Wull we come in, Dod?" inquired Wee Sandy, hugely enjoying the joke.

"Na, na; I'm for nae wutnesses, but I winna lee. Ye can shelter in a beildy bit o' the dyke or the byre till I come oot. I'll no bide."

They crossed the road, and while the three, not yet believing Dod would really do it, hesitated at the end of the little lane which led past the byre to the door, he walked boldly up, and after giving a loud rat-tat, lifted the sneck and walked in.

"Michty me, he's in!" said Big Sandy, giving his damp brow a wipe; "we'd better get oot the road. If he does dae't, I'm no answerable for the consequences. Marget wad think naethin' o' fellin' him wi' a besom shank. We'd better gwa hame."

"No me," said Wee Sandy; "I'll see the end o't if she sud fells a'. Certes, Sandy, ye've potten the vera deil intil Dod the nicht! There maun hae been mair vitrol than ordinar' in Bawbie's bottle. Did ye see the cratur's e'en?"

Sandy gave a grunt uncommonly like a groan. Marget Broon was his own wife's sister, and if it ever leaked out that he had set on Dod to such a night's work it was all up with him.

They stood still, sheltering themselves as well as they could under the overhanging thatch of the byre, and for a minute or two nothing could be heard but their breathing

and the steady drip of the rain on the thatch.

"She's vera tidy about the doors," said Jeems Tamson admiringly; his soul loved order, and his own place was often an eyesore to him.

"Wheesht!" said Big Sandy excitedly, "I'm sure I heard Meg flightin'. I think I'll awa' hame."

"Deil a fut will ye, Sandy," said his kinsman firmly. "What are ye feart for, ye saft lump? We maun see the fun oot. I'll jist slip up to the windy an' see if I can see onything."

Wee Sandy was short of stature and had a light foot. He crept up to the window as noiselessly as a mouse and peered over the window-blind, which was of thick spotted muslin drawn full on a string and reaching up to the middle half, where a white cotton blind met it; fortunately for Sandy, Marget had not drawn it down, and there was a space quite six inches wide between the two, through which he obtained a splendid view of the interior. He had to stretch on tip-toes to accomplish this, but it was worth the trouble. There was not a cleaner, cosier spot in the Beild than Marget Broom's kitchen; it had a stone floor, but was covered all over with rag carpet, and a little round table with a red-and-white dambrod cloth on it. It likewise had one easy-chair covered in Turkey red, and a footstool for the feet. There was a wag-at-the-wa' clock close by the door, its sonsy face ablaze with painted red roses and blue

forget-me-nots, and a grand dresser with an array of "ashets" and "joogs" such as raised envy in every female breast. You see, Marget had no bairns to break things, and was so exceeding careful herself that she hoarded everything that came into her possession. The dambrod cloth and the rag carpet were only put out when all the day's traffic in the kitchen was over; during the day the arms and the back of the Turkey-red chair were carefully happed with newspapers to keep the dust from spoiling it; but at that hour the place wore its cosiest aspect, and presented an inviting contrast to the cheerless aspect of things out of doors.

Wee Sandy stood absolutely still staring straight before him, with his nose jammed against the window-pane. His two comrades, peering anxiously from their shelter, could not see the expression of his face, but it was evident that he was deeply interested.

"He's stannin' like a stooky image, Jeems," said Big Sandy at last. "What's he seein'?"

In about ten minutes Wee Sandy suddenly turned round, stuffing his fists into his mouth to keep down a laugh, and crept back to his chums.

"Weel," said Big Sandy excitedly, "what can ye see—onything?"

"Ay, a heap," said Wee Sandy, spluttering with his mirth; "he's sittin' in the muckle chair, wi' his feet on the stule, an' he's gotten his buits aff, an' the bottle's on the table. I'll lay ye a fiver, Sandy, ye've lost your hauf-sovereign!"

And he had.

CHAPTER III.

NANSE'S WEIRD.

RIGHT up at the west end of the Beild, on the edge of the peat moss, stood a row of five cottages, known as the Whins. They were all inhabited by weavers, and had no crofts, but only "yairds" attached, which yairds sloped down from the back door to the edge of the moss. The windows, however, looked the other way, which was certainly a mistake, for the prospect seen from the yaird was one of great beauty, which changed with every season. The moss was a wide stretch quite three miles across, and was then hemmed in by the first soft, swelling ridges of the Corbie Hills. The wideness and lonely stillness on the moss give it a strange beauty of its own, and in clear, amber evenings the peat-stacks stand out against the sky, their even outlines transfigured into many graceful shapes. There are green spots here and there on the dull brown expanse, and little grassy paths edged with bluebell and colt's-foot and yellow primrose; and then when autumn comes there are patches of glowing purple where the heather grows. Once even

I found a patch of white heather, but that is a rare find. You never saw finer sunsets than I have seen on the Beild moss, and I have often thought that if the colours were reproduced on canvas they would at once be pronounced unnatural and exaggerated. Sometimes the crimson has such a touch of flame, and the gold so fiercely burnished, and the ragged edges of the clouds resting on the Corbie crests so vividly outlined, that it has a look of weirdness denied to softer colourings and outlines. And then the beauty of the soft summer mornings on the treeless moss—the exquisite blendings of light and shade on its variegated breast, blendings created nobody knows how—and the great stillness, save for the continuous twitterings of birds, and the wide, wide freshness of the scene! Oh, Beild folks have a treasure in their moss, and some of them, even dwelling in their humble cottages, appreciate its beauty in every aspect. In wintry weather it is a wild, desolate, uncanny place, with the sea-birds screaming and the curlews calling across the space, and the snow-patches making the dark, rich brown of the bogs seem almost black; the wonder to me has long been that no artist has sought to give its beauty to the world.

Well, in the first Whins cottage there was a little back window in the kitchen, just a tiny opening which four small panes of glass filled, but it was sufficient to give Nanse Wricht the little peep of sunset glory which always reminded her that there was a land beyond those glittering bars where

there shall be no more pain. "No more pain"—that was Nanse's idea of heaven; and seeing she had been a helpless and a hopeless invalid for seven-and-twenty years, during which she had never actually known freedom from pain, except under the influence of opiates, the narrowness of her vision can easily be understood. It all happened so suddenly one evening, when she had only been four years a wife. She was standing at the foot of the yaird, with her hand over her eyes, watching her man Andra hurling his barrow full of peats up from the moss; although there was a lessee of the peat moss, certain Beild folks, the Whins cottagers among the rest, had the right to cart and carry away as many as they required. It was the summer-time, and the Wrichts burned nothing but peats, only laying in a ton of coals about Martinmas for winter use. Well, Nanse, a bonnie, comely young woman, was standing watching her tall buirdly husband contentedly wheeling his barrow, when she felt a strange numbness in her limbs which made her feel sick and faint. She had her pink cotton sunbonnet over her arm, and a pink cotton short gown fastened tidily in at her neat waist, and white cotton stockings pure as the driven snow showing under her short wincey skirt—a dapper, comely, dainty wife as ever stepped, was Nanse Wricht when the blow fell. The numbness crept upon her gradually, and she was hardly able to totter up the little path between the potato rows, with their gay border of marigolds and



"SHE WAS STANDING AT THE FOOT OF THE YAIRD, WITH HER HAND OVER HER EYES" (p. 24).

scented stocks. And when she got into the kitchen she sank into Andra's chair, all white and shuddering, feeling as if she had got a mortal shock.

It seemed a long, long time before the whirl of the barrow wheels fell on her ear, and Andra, suspecting nothing but that Nanse was stirring the porridge or boiling a potato for their supper, stowed away his peats in the shed, and set out for another load. But it occurred to him first to look in just to see what length Nanse was with the supper, and so with his pipe in his mouth he entered the house by the front door. All the Beild houses are built after the same plan—a but and ben, and a passage between front and back doors. The ben held Andra's loom, for weaving was a flourishing trade in the Beild in these earlier days of which I write, and most of the men-folk wrought at it in the long winter evenings. When Andra saw Nanse all huddled together in the chair, his heart leaped to his mouth and his short black pipe fell on the floor.

"Od sake, Nanse, what is't?"

"Something's happened me, Andra," she said pitifully, and stretched out her hands to him with a little appealing gesture, which just told how she regarded him, as her protector and her hope. If anybody could help her, Andra would. His big, kindly face blanched, and he approached her half-hesitatingly, and put his arm round her in that bashful way common to men who don't often give such outward demonstrations of their feelings.

"Dinna greet, Nanse. Tell me what is't. Are ye pained, or what? Try an' tell me, lassie."

"I dinna ken, Andra," she said shudderingly. "I hinna pain, but I've lost pooer—an' oh! I think it's daith!"

"Guid forbid!"

Andra Wricht, who had a heart as gentle and kind and sympathetic as a woman, and whose simple faith in God was as strong as his love for Nanse, rebelled at the thought.

"I'll gang for the doctor, Nanse. Wull I pit ye in your bed first, my dear? an' wull ye tak' a nip o' whusky? It'll dae ye guid."

Nanse nodded; and without further parley Andra lifted her slim, well-nourished body in his arms, and laid her down in the box bed, the one nearest the little back window. Almost every kitchen in the Beild has two box beds side by side along the wall, there being no room for beds in the place that holds the loom.

"I maun get somebody to bide wi' ye or I come back," he said then, looking down mournfully and wonderingly at his wife's white drawn face lying on the red-and-white chintz cover.

"Marget's drinkin' tea at Shoosan Nicoll's, an' the minister was to be there. Gang for Marget."

"Marget?" he said doubtfully; for though Marget was an estimable person, she was not a favourite of Andra's, being too brusque of manner and candid of speech.

"Ay, Marget; an' gang quick, like a man. I'm sure it's daith."

Andra, with a cold perspiration standing on his face, ran out of the house up to the head of the Whins and across John Dawson's hayfield, taking the quickest way to Shoosan's. Before he got there he saw Marget approaching. The tea-drinking was over, and she was coming to the Whins on her way home to tell Nanse all about it—how agreeable the minister had been, and how Shoosan had had out all her best things, but had masked the tea in the brown teapot, and the little maid had forgot to transfer it to the china one, and so the effect was spoiled. When she saw Andra running she guessed something had happened, but never for a moment thought of harm to Nanse. And when he incoherently bade her run for her life, and continued his own way hurriedly to summon the doctor, it put her all in a flutter, and made her fear the worst. In three minutes she was by Nanse's bed; and had Andra but seen her gentleness and heard her low, soothing voice, he would have changed his opinion regarding her—and indeed he did before many days were past. Before dark the doctor came, but he did not say very much; and that was about all he ever did say, he or any of his profession, and many came to see Nanse, for she was an interesting case. It was disease of the spine, and after that summer night poor Nanse Wricht never set foot to the ground again, nor crossed the threshold of her own door by her young husband's side.

CHAPTER IV.

MARGET BROON'S NEWS.

AND that was seven-and-twenty years ago. Just think what it was for a young, blithe, happy woman, to whom the joy of living was very great, and whose simple duties were daily so carefully and gladly performed, to be thus laid aside, set apart for a fierce baptism of pain and a course of renunciation from which a stronger heart might have shrunk. She was old in suffering before I saw her and learned the many lessons she could teach, and once, marvelling greatly at the Lord's dealing with one so simple-hearted and so truly good, I ventured to question His goodness after the hot way of youth. She reproved me gently, yet with a sweetness which made her words memorable: "When it is the Lord's will, it is sweet even to lie still."

Some little time after Nanse's seizure a great lady in the neighbourhood, the Lady Christian Muir, was similarly afflicted, though not so helplessly at first; and as long as she was able to be driven in a carriage she came from time to time to see Nanse, and to com-

pare experiences. Melancholy picture, with a touch of indescribable pathos, to see the great lady sitting by the bed of her humbler sister, while they talked of the sad journey which could have no ending but the grave! And as the years went by, and the disease progressed in both, they calculated that Nanse would probably be taken first. But it was not so. After Lady Christian was also confined to her room, she still communicated with Nanse by means of a deputy, until at last she was taken away by a sudden sharp inflammation, after seventeen years of invalid life.

At first when Nanse was laid aside it seemed imperative that somebody must be got to look after the house and the comfort of Andra—who had been so well ministered unto by the willing hands of his dear wife, that he most acutely felt the change. But Andra, though listening respectfully to every suggestion, followed none. His mind was made up, had been made up from the first, that if Nanse needed somebody to wait on her, he and he alone should do it.

And he did for seven-and-twenty long years; and what a source of rich gratification it was to both that he was able! For they could thus shut the door on the "fremd" as they called it, and be alone with their awful sorrow. Andra had always been a good man and a kind husband; his nature, though deep and quiet, had unprobed depths of kindness in it; but now he developed a wealth of tenderness which made his ministrations marvellous in the eyes of Nanse.

He did everything for her—made her bed, prepared her meals, swept in the hearth, and even at nights after the door was locked washed the clothes; and he would be up betimes and have them out on the lines before a neighbour was astir, and it was all done with a patience so unassailable and so abounding that it made folks wonder and keep silence. His task at first with Nanse was no easy one. It is not to be thought that a young woman should all at once give up everything and allow no murmur to cross her lips. She has since told me, with tears of shame in her meek, sweet eyes, that for weeks, ay, and months at first, she cried night and day, reproaching the Lord for His hardness to her and hers, the wherefore of which she could not understand. I found it difficult, looking upon her present serenity, to believe it, and yet it was true. But that all passed as the weary years went by; rebellion was followed by silent acquiescence, out of which grew at length a quiet and gracious waiting upon the Lord.

All his spare time Andra worked assiduously at his loom; and, oh, who shall say what glory of self-sacrifice, what wonder of silent heroism, was woven into those webs during these many lonely hours! Nanse, lying in her bed or sitting in her big chair by the little window, listened to the rattling of the loom, thinking it heavenly music, and praying, praying always for a blessing on her Andra, who was such a king among men. One day in the month Andra had to leave her, to carry his finished web to

Cairndrum and bring back material for another one.

On these days Marget Broon always came from the east end of the town to abide by Nanse, and though Nanse enjoyed the change for a little, she was always glad when night and Andra came. Nanse had been a by-ordinary fastidious and particular housewife, and it was not to be expected that Andra could keep things in a similar state of perfection. He would not have had the time, even had he known how. And when Marget Broon came, with her bustling ways and loud cheery voice announcing her intention of giving the place a good "redd up," Nanse became painfully conscious of the unsatisfactory state of her abode, and was generally that day either morose and silent, or fretful and complaining.

She was genuinely attached to Marget, however they being a kind of far-off cousins, as almost all the Beild folks were sib to each other.

This closeness of relationship makes it awkward for the stranger, and I have myself more than once been in a tight place through too much candour of speech about one to another. A stranger in the Beild is wise to hold his peace till he understands all the connections, and I doubt life would be too short for such an accomplishment.

Marget and Leezbeth Broon had been early left orphans, with a good deal of gear in addition to the croft and the house. Soon after their father's death Leezbeth married Big Sandy Morison, which was not

a change for the better; but Marget continued in single blessedness through all the years of young womanhood, and declared her intention of so remaining aye.

To be sure, she was not very well faured, being big and uncouth to a degree, and having a greenish-grey eye with a decided squint, which gave her in her angry moments a very evil look. But she had siller and gear, and several had made an unsuccessful bid for such a comfortable "doon sittin'."

At fifty-one she still abode in single blessedness, but finally took the plunge in a most unexpected way. Nanse was sitting in her big chair one evening, her eyes alternately fixed on the pages of the Bible which had been one of Lady Christian's many gifts to her, and on the little back window across which the red glow of the sunset lay bonnily, making a bright bit of colour in a melancholy place.

Nanse was now a sad spectacle to behold, especially to eyes not used to the sight. Her poor frame was all swollen and twisted and distorted, and her frail white hands with thin knotted fingers were only able to support the lightest burden. She was not able to knit or sew now—a great deprivation; but all the deprivations had come gradually, and she had been able to give things up one by one with scarcely a pang.

"I'm a useless block noo—quate useless," she would say, with her sweet, melancholy smile. "The Lord'll sune be dune wi' me. He'll no let me be ower lang a cumberer of the ground." Then I would say to her that

that could never be so long as she had me, and such as me, to teach lessons in humility and patience, and cheerful waiting on the will of God.

Andra was at the loom as usual, their tea being over, the hearth tidily swept in, and the little table set close by Nanse's chair, with her books and her clean handkerchief folded above them, and a broken tumbler with a red rose and a sprig of mignonette making a sweet scent all over the little place. Presently, when Nanse's hand had grown a little weary with holding the Book, there fell athwart the front window the big shadow of Marget Broon; and Nanse saw it with surprise, for it was neither Sunday night nor Wednesday night, which were her kinswoman's regular periods of visitation.

And it seemed to her that Marget lifted the sneck of the door with a somewhat hasty hand, and shut it too with more than her usual vigour.

"Marget," she said, looking round in mild surprise, "what is't, my 'ooman? I hope ye're no noweel."

Marget bounced down in Andra's chair; her face was very red, and she flung back her bonnet strings, and exhibited other signs of perturbation, but never spoke a word.

"Where's Andra?" she asked finally.

"At the loom. Did ye no hear it as ye cam' by? He's gettin' on fell fast wi' the new wab."

Ay, a' richt. He canna hear, can he?'

inquired Marget, leaning somewhat forward in her chair, and fixing her eyes on Nanse's face.

"Hear what?" asked Nanse in some bewilderment, for she could not understand this manner of Marget's, who, though boisterous as a rule, was always entirely self-possessed.

"Hear us—what we say, I mean?"

Nanse smiled.

"Fine ye ken he canna, Mag; even if he were as gleg in the hearin' as he was, the loom mak's ower muckle din. But what way d'ye speir?"

"Oh, I've something awfu' to tell ye, Nanse. What d'ye think?"

"Sandy hasna left Leezbeth, I houp?" said Nanse with a great start, that being a scandal occasionally threatened in the family, and greatly dreaded by the more peaceable members of it.

"Hoots! no; Sandy'll never dae that, Nanse; it's a cry an' nae 'oo wi' him, an' he kens when he's weel aff," said Marget indifferently. "It's me that's in't this time, Nanse. I'm gaun to tak' a man!"

"Marget!"

Nanse gave a sudden lurch forward in her surprise, which caused a sharper pain than usual to shoot through her, blanching her very lips.

Marget nodded primly, and fanned her hot face with her mauve bonnet strings, and her look was comical to see.

"Havers, Marget Broon! I dinna believed——"

"It's true; ye'll say waur when ye ken what it is, but it's my business an' it's me that has to live wi' the cratur," said Marget a trifle aggressively, thus betraying a secret shame of her choice.

"No Jeem Tanson?" queried Nanse, almost wistfully, for she had often thought, conning in her solitude the loneliness and sorrows of others, that if Marget and Jeems, both so good-hearted though so differently disposed, could see their way to forgather, what a fine thing it would be for both.

Marget shook her head, and sat up with the boldest look of defiance on her face.

"Ye'll never guess—so I'll tell ye, as I cam' to dae't. It's Dod Aitken."

"Eh? Guid sakes!"

It was the nearest approach to irreverent language Nanse had ever uttered, but she was so genuinely appalled that she could not help it.

"That cratur! It's no true, Mag. If it is, ye're no wise."

Now Marget had expected surprise, but this seemed rather strong, and she immediately resented it.

"An' what for am I no wise? What's the maitter wi' the man? He's a God-forsaken cratur that's true, but that's no his wyte. He has naebody to look after him, or to care whether he minds hissel' or no."

"That's a' true, Marget, but—but——"

She could really say no more. Dod Aitken was the butt and byword of the Beild, a creature whom some few pitied and all despised, and to hear Marget Broon,

her own kinswoman, a person of substance and standing in the place, calmly announce her intention of marrying him, was beyond everything.

"That's a' true, wummin," she repeated helplessly. "But ye're no wise

CHAPTER V.

TAKING COUNSEL.

THE two women were silent a few moments, regarding each other steadfastly.

"What ails ye at Dod, Nanse? Ye dinna ken onything aboot him 'cepin what ye hear, an' that's lees—Beild lees tae, the warst that's gaun, a'budy kens that."

There was sufficient truth in this to make Nanse think a moment, which she did, her face looking very anxious and white under the goffered border of her mutch. She did not really know much about Dod, had not even seen him for twenty years and more; and the Beild *was* a lecin' place, she could not deny that.

"Weel but, Mag, he has naething—a cratur without gear or siller, no even a loom till hissel'—an orra man workin' to onybody for twa shillin's a day. It wad be an unco dooncome for you, my 'ooman."

"But I hae enough for twa," said Marget. "I'll no say that Dod hasna fauts, but they're fauts that'll mend. D'ye think he'd

spend as muckle time in Bawbie's if the Morisons didna fleg him? I canna bide thae Morisons; they're an ill crew."

"Hoots! Marget, Leeb's man's no that ill—I ken naething about the young ane. An' are ye gaun to mak' a new man oot o' Dod, Mag? Weel, it'll be a ploy for ye."

It would be impossible to describe the peculiar happy gleam of sly humour in Nanse's eye as she uttered this. Her long sufferings had not robbed her of her faculty for seeing the queer side of things, and now that the shock of the announcement was over, the idea of Marget Broon marrying Dod Aitken seemed the funniest thing she had ever heard of.

"An' when, Marget, was this a' settled, nicht I speir?"

"Last nicht," responded Marget promptly.

"I was sittin' at the fireside efter nine, thinkin' on gaun to my bed, when he cam'."

"An' speirt ye?"

Marget nodded.

"He had a guid face, but I maun haud my tongue. What does Leezbeth say?"

Marget gave a kind of snort, and crushed the mauve ribbons in her hand. "D'ye think I've telt her? No me! I hinna telt onybody 'cep' yersel', Nanse, an' I'm no gaunna."

"But ye'll hae to tell somebody," said Nanse perplexedly. "When is't gaun to be?"

"Afore hairst. We needna wait."

"An' I suppose he'll jist stap in to your fireside, Marget?"

"Jist that."

"Imphm."

Nanse became silent. She could think of nothing else to say; nor could she bring her mind to utter any explanations. She had not indeed heard anything that so vexed her for many a day.

"Ye'll staund by me, Nanse, through the clash o' the place? It's Leeb an' Shoosan Nicoll I'm feart for. Fegs! ye'd think Shoosan was gentry since she had a son gaed to the college. They'll maybe no hae their sorrows to seek wi' him yet; an' there's a something in Jeanie Morison's e'e the noo I dinna like. Tam Pitbladdie says he hasna cairret a letter frae Erskine till Jeanie for a month an' mair. If he breaks that dear lassie's heart, the Lord'll surely set a judgment on him, student or no student. It fairly skunnerts me to think on the Nicolls, a' but Dauvit."

"Eh wheesht, Mag, there's naething wrang wi' the Nicolls. Dauvit's as fine a man as ever he was, an' Shoosan's no ill. Let them abe."

But Marget would not be silenced. She had an old grudge at Susan since the days when they had been girls together, and David Nicoll had been the catch in the Beild. He was a little laird, owning his own hundred acres, and Marget had once thought to be mistress of the Binns.

"If ye'd been at that tea-pairty at Christmas ye wad hae been skunnert yersel' to see Shoosan sittin' wi' a silk goon on and red ribbons in her mutch, and ringin' the bell for Beaton's Ann to bring in the tea, and tryin' to look as if she had aye been used

to it. It was like to gar me throw. An' speakin' English afore the minister, and biddin' Dauvit no drink his tea oot o' his saucer, till the puir cheild brunt his tongue an' had to let a moothfu' on the tablecloth! I'm vext for Dauvit."

Nanse silently laughed. She had long been removed from such petty gossip and jealousies, and it seemed a great wonder to her now that anybody should concern their heads with it for a moment, when life was so full of graver matters.

"Ye're a birkie, Mag, an' if Dod gets a guid doon sittin', he'll hae to ca' canny for't. Ye're very near as sharp in the tongue as Leeb."

"Weel but, Nanse, ye dinna ken a'. Shoosan affronted me that nicht afore Mr. Booman, an' ca't me an auld maid—as if I couldna hae been mairret a dizzen times fu her aince! I vera near telt her that mysel'. But I had my chance at supper-time. She had a muckle pie bakit in a milk basin, an' the paste! ye could hae ridden a peat cairt owert athoot breakin't; an' so I jist said, 'We'd be the better o' a chisel an' a hammer.' She grew red at that, but what for should she ca' me an auld maid?"

Nanse smiled that sweet slight smile which always seemed to say that such things were not worth troubling about.

"A' weel, ye'll be even wi' her noo, Marget. Can I tell Andra?"

"I'm no heedin'. Andra's a sensible man, Nanse; there's few like him," said Marget truthfully, as she began to tie her mauve

ribbons into a neat bow. "Weel, I maun awa' up by. I'm awn Dauvit Nicoll for seed taties, an' I may as weel kill twa dougs wi' ae stane."

Nanse looked at her as she had often done, thinking her a fine big sonsy woman, full of common sense and kindness too, and again wondered that she should contemplate such a step as marriage with a wastrel like Dod Aitken.

"Eh, sirce, sic a clash i' the Beild it'll be as never was."

"Weel, it'll keep them frae lecin' for a while aboot ither folk," said Marget grimly. "Guid-nicht, Nanse; I'll fesh Dod to see ye some nicht efter it's dark."

"Ay, dae that, Marget. Guid-nicht; I wush ye weel, my 'ooman, ye ken that."

She offered her poor frail hand to her kinswoman, who grasped it warmly, feeling for the moment an unaccustomed sensation which made her "like to greet." And to hide this queer feeling, of which she was quite ashamed, she suddenly banged out of the door and stalked by the kitchen window, as if she had some great and important object in view.

Nanse's mind was now entirely diverted from her study of the Book, and she was fain to chap on the table for Andra to come ben, but restrained herself, knowing he would come at nine o'clock to stir the meal into the porridge.

Marget, very tall and erect and aggressive, marched on, holding up her skirts to the top of her elastic boots, and crossed the road in

a slanting direction to the Binns, which was an unpretending domicile, surrounded by a rather scattered and dilapidated steading, Dauvit being a trifle near and never spending a penny unless absolutely necessary. As Marget entered the little courtyard, which was separated from the road by a dry stone dyke, she heard the clatter of milk-pails, and presently Beaton's Annie appeared with her skirts kilted and two full pails in her hands.

"Maister in, Annie?" queried Marget.

"No, he's no hame frae the Kirklands; but *she's* in."

"Does she no gang to the byre noo ava, Annie?"

"No her; my mither comes ower at milkin' time," replied the maid, and a significant glance passed between the two, as Marget, without knock or other warning, as was common in the Beild, walked into the Binns kitchen. But there was nobody there, except the cat blinking before the warm fire, and the shaggy old collie, who gave his tail a feeble wag of recognition.

"Are ye there, Shoosan?" Marget called out, and proceeded without further ceremony along the little passage to the parlour, where she found the mistress sitting before the table with a letter spread out before her, which she evidently found some difficulty in making out.

"Oh, it's you, Marget; sit doon," said the mistress affably, but with a certain shade of condescension quite apparent to her visitor, who inwardly resented it. Shoosan did not

rise, but sat round in her chair, with a complacent smile on her little wizened face, and smoothed her black alpaca apron, which had given place to the wise-like white linen one that had offended the taste of the now fastidious Erskine. Shoosan had but the one son, and her later years were made a burden to her trying to live up to him, to ape a gentility of which she knew nothing, and to make plain things, good and pleasant in their way, seem other than they were. It had given her wee, wizened face a weary look, and her bright black eyes a restless gleam. At Erskine's suggestion she had abandoned, with her white apron, many of the household duties in which her soul really delighted, and instead of bustling about in her short-gown at milking times, she now sat in the parlour with a black gown on and white linen cuffs with a lace edge, fretting her soul out lest Mrs. Beaton and Annie should not be particular with the strippings, and trying to convince herself that she was the lady Erskine so ardently desired his mother to be. She stood in slavish fear of the boy she had borne, and was not so happy as she had been in the days when he had run a bare-foot callant in moleskin breeks to the Beild school.

"Hoo's a' the day east the toon?" she inquired rather absently. "This is a letter frae Erskine. He'll be hame frae the college neist month, but he's gaun to spend a week first wi' ane o' the Professors, at his hoose at the seaside."

"Imphm," said Marget grimly. "I houp he'll be muckle the better o' it."

"He writes a fell fine letter, but it's no very easy to read, an' he's seekin' siller. Dauvit's gey an' near, Marget," said Shoosan, in a most unusual burst of confidence. "He'll be as thrawn ower sendin' a pound or twa to the laddie as if he had a dizzen to weart on."

"A' weel, them as has gentlemen sons maun pay for them," said Marget flatly.

"I hae a bit by me, if Dauvit should be mair thrawn than ordinar'. There's nae use makin' a fule o' the laddie. An' naebody kens what micht come o' him gaun to vusit the Professor. It micht mak' his fortin, but Dauvit says it wad set him a bonnie sicht better to come hame an' how the neeps. He hasna a soul above neeps, Erskine says, an' he's no faur wrang."

"Erskine'll never be as guid a man as his faither, Shoosan," said Marget bluntly. "An' you're a puir silly body to encourage him to mak' a fule o' his faither."

Shoosan reddened, and the black bugles in her headdress jingled ominously.

"I didna ask your opeenion on Erskine that I'm aware o', Marget. Ye can keep it or you're speirt for't," she said with great dignity. "What, micht I ask, gied me the honour o' a ca' the nicht?"

"Oh, it wasna you I wantit. I cam' to pay the seed I got; but as Binns is no in, I'll see him again," said Marget. "But there's wan thing I maun say afore I bid ye guid-nicht, Mistress Nicoll, an' that is,

if it's you that's settin' Erskine, puir silly cratur, against my niece, Jeanie Morison, neither you nor him'll get aff wi't."

With which ominous threat Marget carried herself off with a great deal of dignity, her head high in the air, and wrath blazing in her soul. Thus was war declared between the east and west of the Beild.

CHAPTER VI.

DOD CRIES OFF.

DOD AITKEN had had a good dram before he paid his visit to Marget Broon, and a glass out of her special bottle had further elevated him; but he was by no means "fou," and when he left her house he knew that he had offered himself and been accepted. He regarded it, however, entirely in the light of a joke, and was some surprised to find no trace of his comrades, whom he had left waiting outside. Having heard the terrible news from Wee Sandy, Big Sandy Morison had slunk away home afraid to think of the consequences. Leezbeth had a flighting ready for him as usual, but he paid no attention to it; and even his daughter Jeanie could not rouse him out of the deep depression which had laid hold on him. How a couple so uncouth and so ill-assorted as Sandy and Leezbeth Morison could have had such a sweet bairn as Jeanie was a problem which might have puzzled a psychologist, had there been such a being in the Beild. She was indeed a bonnie sweet bairn,

comely to look at and having a lovely disposition. But for her the cottage would have been a miserable pandemonium, for the mother's temper was truly awful.

It was getting into the gloaming, and Jeanie was setting the lamp ready to light on the kitchen table, when her Aunt Marget came in hot and tired with her walk from the Binns.

"Whaur's yer mither, lassie?" was her question.

"In the gairden. We've been at the berries a' day, Auntie Mag. My! what a heap there is!"

"But they're no ripe—at least, mine's no."

"They're ready for jam, mither says. I'll tell her you're here."

"Bide a wee or I get my breath," said Aunt Marget, dropping into a chair.

"You're tired, auntie; wad ye like onything? Ye've surely been a faur gate," said the girl, with that kindly way peculiar to her.

"No me, only wast the toon at Nanse Wricht's an' the Binns, but I was washin' a' forenune," replied Marget, eyeing her niece keenly and with no small measure of affection. She was a pleasant bairn to look at, neatly clad, and with a colour on her cheek as pink and soft as a new-blown rose; her bright brown hair had a natural curl in it, and crept silyly over her white brow, sometimes near to her bonnie clear grey eyes.

"I say, Jeanie," said Marget then, with more abruptness than usual, "when did ye hae a letter frae Erskine Nicoll?"

Jeanie blushed deeply, and her fingers trembled slightly as she put the globe on the lamp.

"No for a long time, auntie; but he's very busy at the college I ken, an' he'll be hame sune."

"Ay," said Marget drily, and pursed up her lips. These signs in a young maiden indicating that the matter lay at Jeanie's heart sore angered Marget Broon, and she could hardly hold her peace.

"Dinna build yoursel', lassie, on men, for they're as fickle as the weathercock the wund blows a' ways," she said wisely. "Weel, I'll awa'. Ye hinna heard onything oot o' the common the day, hae ye?"

Jeanie looked surprised.

"Naething partic'lar, Auntie Mag. What way are ye speirin'?"

"Oh, naething. Ye'll maybe hear something sune. Come ower wi' your stockin' at night, Jeanie, an' you an' me'll hae a crack."

Somewhat surprised at her aunt's demeanour, Jeanie accompanied her to the door. At that moment Sandy, pipe in mouth, sauntered round the end of the house, and he gave such a start at the sight of his sister-in-law that his pipe fell to the ground.

"Guid sakes! hae ye never seen me afore, Sandy?" she inquired with good-natured scorn. "I doot ye've gotten an attack o' the nerves."

Somewhat reassured, Sandy stooped down and stuck his pipe in his mouth.

"I hope you're weel, Marget. What's new wi' ye?"

"Naething; at least, no muckle that's onybody's business. Leezbeth's at the berries, Jeanie says. Daur a body speak till her?"

"I wadna risk it; she's gotten a thorn in her thoomb an' an extra ane in her tongue," said Sandy slily, and laughing silently Marget took herself off. She had walked the whole length of the Beild, even loitering a little on the way, in the hope of seeing Dod; but had been disappointed. She now hastened home, making no doubt that he would be round to see her after dark, slipping in by the back way across Weelum Da'rymple's yaird. But Dod had no such intention, and that night passed, and some more nights, without bringing the renegade suitor to the back door. Marget began to wonder a good deal at this, and to fret a little; but it was not till Saturday night that she had an opportunity of asking an explanation. It was just at the darkening, and she had been round at Tam Pitbladdo's for her Sunday's tea and sugar and bit of cheese, which she was carrying in a little basket, when she came face to face at a corner with Dod, who was dressed rather better than usual, as if he had something out of the common to do.

"I suppose ye're comin' roond, Dod?" she said graciously, and without any exhibition of coyness or shyness. "Ye've been gey an' lang about it."

Dod looked sheepish, but slightly determined, as he gave his jacket a curious hitch on to his shoulders.

"No, I'm no gaun roond, so ye're wrang."

"Ye're no vera ceevil, Dod, an' there's a heap to crack ower. Ye'd better come," she said calmly.

"I'll no. What for should I come?" he demanded, now fairly roused.

Marget was by no means sweet-tempered herself, and she had a right to be angry; but she tried to speak calmly.

"Weel, Dod, efter a thing's settled I suppose a man does tak' it coolly, but I must say you cow the cuddie," she said good-humouredly. "Ye'd better tak' care, for fear I tak' the rue."

It was impossible to misunderstand her, and Dod, summoning all his effrontery, determined to be off with the woman there and then.

"Look here, Marget; it was only a ploy. Ye nicht 'a' kent that. They beat me a hauf-soverin' in Bawbie's I wadna speir ye, an' I did. Ye'd better say nae mair about it."

Marget looked dazed, not taking it all in, and Dod was about to take advantage of her silence to make himself scarce, when she gripped him by the arm, her comely face transfigured by the passion of a woman scorned.

"I'd better say nae mair about it, had I? We'll see about that. I'll hae the law o' ye, Dod Aitken, an' learn ye to mak' a fule o' me in Bawbie Windrum's."

"Ye can gang an' flyte them that's sib to ye, Mag," said Dod coarsely. "It was the Morisons did it; it was only a bit fun, ye gomeril, an' the quater ye keep the better."

Marget here released him as suddenly as she had gripped him, and stalked away. Dod cast a nervous glance at her over his shoulder, not liking her sudden collapse into silence. When he saw her enter her own house and shut the door he continued his way west, and his countenance wore a distinctly troubled air. For a wonder he passed by Bawbie's, and also Tam Pitbladdo's, which was the post office and the village grocery store, and a great place for clashes of an evening. As he came up to the schoolhouse he saw Bruce Rymer, the schoolmaster, leaning up against his door-post smoking a pipe, and watching his flowers, which he had finished watering. Bruce Rymer was a Beild laddie in one sense, having been sent a pauper child of two from Edinburgh to the care of a widow woman in the Beild, now dead. He had always been a sharp laddie, and had risen step by step till he was now master of the Beild school; nor did his ambition end there, though he kept his own counsel. He had not the Beild cast of features, which was a little inclined to coarseness and heaviness; but was a slim youth, though well built, and his head was of that shape which warranted his ambition, for if ever brow and face gave evidence of intellect Bruce Rymer's did. He was a well-conditioned young fellow, simple in his tastes and happy in his manners; the Beild folks were all fond of him, and proud of him too, though perhaps just a trifle more familiar than he always liked. It required all his skill and dignity

to command his position among the bairns in the Beild school. Having no relatives in the world so far as he was aware, he elected to abide by himself, and Jess Lockhart, a neighbour woman, did for him. He gave Dod a nod, and was some surprised when that worthy opened the gate and came up to the door.

"I want a word o' ye, maister. Can I come in by?"

"Oh, certainly," the schoolmaster replied, and ushered him into the kitchen, which was also his living room, and very comfortable quarters too for a bachelor to inhabit.

"I've gotten mysel' into a scrape, Bruce—a wild scrape, wi' a wummin tae, deil tak' her," he began dolefully, scratching his head. "D'ye ken onything about the law, Bruce? I'm in a bonnie fix."

Restraining his desire to laugh, Rymer sat down on the table and answered seriously,—

"I know a little. A scrape with a woman, Dod! Man, I thought you were past all that."

"It was only a joke, but it's daith to play a joke wi' a wummin, especially on the mairry-in' question," said Dod forlornly, and thereupon related the tale of his woes, which sent Bruce into a roar of laughter, in spite of his effort to keep sober.

"She hasn't got any claim on you, Dod, I assure you—none at all," he said confidently. "So you needn't trouble your head about that. But I say, why don't you take the chance? It's not every day a man gets the

offer of such a comfortable home. Upon my word, Dod, if I was ten years older I'd go in for it myself. It's the very thing for you."

Dod shook his head.

"Are ye quite sure? I was gaun up by to the minister, when I saw you. If ye're no sure I'll gang up yet, an' I've got my mind made up if he says I'm to mairry her—I'll gang ower to the Frees."

"Ye needna fash, Dod. Mr. Bowman couldna say other than I've said; but you take my advice, and jump at the chance. Just think, if you have another illness like you had last winter, what a different thing to be nursed by your wife than to lie in the misery you did. Just go home, Dod, and think it over."

"But she has an ill tongue, they say, an' she's gey nippet wi' the bawbees—an' she'd pit the peter on me gaun to Bawbie's," said Dod, still scratching his head.

"She might do worse than that; you don't get any good at Bawbie's, Dod, and if she gives you your drappie at your own fireside, think how much better it would be."

"If she'd dae that. She keeps guid stuff tae, real Glenlivet, faur better than the best Brig. There's nae vitrol in her bottle," said Dod wistfully.

"Just try it, Dod; go straight back to Marget and make it up, and I'll be your best man," said Rymer, entering into the spirit of the thing, and wondering how it would end.

"A' weel, I'll see. You're sure she canna

tak' the law o' me," he repeated, as he got up to go.

"Certain; and anyhow, you can't take the breeks off a Hielandman, Dod, unless it's true about that stocking-foot!"

Dod, however, was not to be drawn on this point, and with a rather grumpy good-night he took himself off.

Rymer was sufficiently interested in this curious romance to take the trouble to follow Dod a bit down the Beild, far enough to see him slip round his own lane and across Marget Broon's back yard. Then, laughing silently to himself, he made tracks for the Manse, to tell the joke to Mr. Bowman.

CHAPTER VII.

A NOBLE SOUL.

THE Manse was but a stone's throw from the schoolhouse, standing in a roomy garden which had a back door to the moss. The schoolhouse bounded its east side, the Whins the west. The kirk itself was a most unpretentious building, more resembling a barn than a place of worship. It had been built for a mission hall, to accommodate the needs of a scattered population, removed three miles from any parish church, and had at length been converted into a *quoad sacra* parish, of which the Reverend Hugh Bowman had been the first and only minister. He also was a bachelor. The Beild was a byword indeed for bachelor men, and it was a common saying in other parishes that the Beild was the only safe place for men who did not want to marry. The Reverend Hugh Bowman, however, had his reasons, the best of their kind, for his celibacy, which was to him a matter of simple duty. He was the eldest of a large family of sons, and his mother was a widow. He was licensed when his father, the

manager of a shipyard down at the coast, died suddenly; and there being nothing left, the chief burden of his young brothers' education had fallen on him.

That was twenty years ago, and though comparatively speaking still a young man, the minister was as far from marrying as ever, seeing he had still to contribute largely to the support of his mother, and furthermore assist certain ne'er-do-weels among his brothers, who sponged off him as mercilessly as leeches. He was a man of good parts, though by no means brilliant; he had been "hauden doon a' his days," as Beild folk said, and a man constantly under the heel of sordid care of the most grinding sort finds it difficult to soar to ideal heights. He had the mind and the tastes of a scholar, but none of the gifts of the popular preacher, and he had therefore never succeeded in getting a better charge than the Beild, though for the sake of his family he had sometimes tried. In his own soul he was fairly content with his lot. If the people were simple and many of them ignorant, they were unexact and very kind to him after a fashion of their own, which he now understood, though his first twelve months in the Beild had been a crucial experience upon which he could now look back with amusement, though it had been a very genuine discipline at the time. He had a Beild woman, also an old maid, for a house-keeper—a decent body devoted to his interests and a great deal more saving of his substance than he was himself. This

person's name was Isabel Blyth; everybody called her "the minister's Easy."

The minister's Easy knew the schoolmaster's rap, and just opened the door about six inches when he knocked that night.

"Ye canna come in the nicht, Bruce Rymer," she said, with extraordinary sharpness. "It's the back o' nine, an' he's no at 'thirdly' yet. His supper's set, but he winna stir to eat it. Ye'd better wait or the morn's nicht."

"All right, don't snap off my head, Easy," said Bruce good-humouredly, but at that moment the study door opened and the minister came out.

"Hulloa, Bruce, come in. Fetch ben the coffee, Easy, and a cup for Mr. Rymer."

"Easy says you're not at 'thirdly' yet, Mr. Bowman," said the schoolmaster, with a merry twinkle in his eye, as he glanced after the retreating form of Easy. "It's only a joke I came to tell you, but it'll keep."

"It'll do me good, and make the coffee more stimulating. Come in, Bruce."

Bruce hung up his hat and followed the minister to the parlour door, which they entered together; and it was then you might have seen what a big, powerful frame the minister had, for though Bruce was by no means a small man, he looked so beside his friend. Hugh Bowman was forty-seven, and looked his years to the full. His hair was grey, as were the slight whiskers which somewhat softened the long strong outline

of his face. To live in such a healthy place as the Beild he looked sallow and out of health; he suffered indeed perpetually from biliousness, which perhaps made him look more melancholy than he felt.

Between these two a strong friendship existed, born of interest on the one hand and fervent gratitude on the other. Rymer often said that to Mr. Bowman he owed all he was or could ever hope to become. As for the minister, the companionship of such a young, bright, ardent soul, which knew not the meaning of impossible or unattainable, had made his lonely existence in that remote parish a more tolerable thing, and there was nothing of which he did not believe his friend and *protégé* capable.

"There's going to be a marriage in the Beild, Mr. Bowman; and if you guess the contracting parties I'll make you a present of my quarter's salary, though it's half mortgaged already for books."

"A marriage!" said the minister, as he stretched his long legs on the hard horsehair sofa. "Faith, that's news. Guessing is always a disastrous business for the unimaginative. Who's going to be married—not Erskine Nicoll, surely, and Jeanie Morison?"

Rymer's face reddened.

"No; I haven't heard *that* yet—have you?"

"No; and I don't expect to. What a fool the laddie is! I saw him in Edinburgh on Wednesday, and he minded me on nothing but that bantam cock that jumps about Jess

Lockhart's door. But he'll come to his bit. Well, who is it?"

"Marget Broon for one. Now who do you think she'd wale in the Beild?"

"Marget Broon!"

The minister positively started, not crediting what he heard.

"Marget Broon! and who in the world is she going to marry?"

"Can't you think of anybody?"

"James Thompson?"

Curiously enough the same thought occurred to him as had often dwelt with Nanse Wricht.

"No. You'll never guess, so I'll tell you—Dod Aitken."

"Oh, Bruce, you never turned over a bigger Beild lee than that," said the minister.

"It's no a lee. Dod came to me in distress about half an hour ago," said Bruce, and rapidly told the tale, finishing up with Dod's threat to "gang ower to the Frees."

"So you think you've sent him to make it up?" said the minister, when the laugh was over. "Certes, ye've taken a responsibility on yourself which would make me nervous. What a stir there'll be in the place if such a thing should be! Man, women are queer creatures. Fancy a well-conditioned, independent woman like Marget deigning to look at such a creature as Dod Aitken. It's past finding out. I've gotten very ill news from Pithorn to-night, Bruce."

As the minister said these words, drawing at the same time a letter from his pocket, an extraordinary change passed over his face,

making it the face of an old and careworn man.

"From my mother, anent my brother Willie, the youngest at home. What do you think has happened there?"

Bruce shook his head. So many domestic worries had happened to the minister, and so much ill news came from Pithorn, that it seemed impossible to think of anything new.

"Well, he's married, Bruce, secretly married, been for eight months and more, to a bit servant lassie that was with my mother last summer; and he'll be a father or he is twenty, and earning seventeen shillings a week. Is that not enough to turn anybody's hair grey, Bruce Rymer, and put marriage out of the fashion?"

"Indeed it is," said Bruce; but though he spoke so quietly his eye showed his sympathy, which was not without its touch of comfort for the minister.

"It's awful," said Bruce again—"awful. Your mother will be in a terrible way over it."

"She is—and coming so soon after Bob's affair. Oh! Bruce, the mother of fatherless boys is to be pitied; her sorrows 'come not single spies, but in battalions.'"

"But she has aye you, Mr. Bowman, and that makes up for a lot."

"I've tried to be a good son to her, but I'm whiles weary of it all, Bruce; the poor woman has become fretful and complaining, her head half turned, I believe, with her troubles. And Willie wants to bring his wife home to the cottage, and my mother

can't bide the thought, as is natural. I'll just have to set them up with the few pounds I had laid by for something else."

Bruce got up and took a stride across the floor. He was young and somewhat impatient, after the manner of youth.

"It's enough to make a man use bad language, Mr. Bowman, and were I you I'd leave Willie to fight his own battle. You've done a sight too much for him already, if you'll excuse me saying so, and I'd leave them all, except your mother of course, to find their own level. I've heard you say yourself there isn't a bit of gratitude in them."

"Well, there isn't much," said Mr. Bowman, with a slow, uncertain smile hovering about his sad mouth. "Look at John, for instance; he has three hundred a year up in Bradford, and married a wife with a thousand pounds, and all he sends to my mother is a pound at New Year."

"Don't tell me any more, Mr. Bowman, or I will 'sweer,' as wee Jock Howie said in the school one day. Upon my word, it's shameful, and I don't know where the justice of Heaven is, for there isn't any on earth."

The minister did not hear what his young friend was saying, for his heart was wrung all in a moment by a painful vision of what, in happier circumstances, might have been. He had given Bruce a very full confidence, but there was one thing he had not told him, and would not yet.

"I'll not be in a hurry to answer this

letter," he said. "My mother wants me to go down to Pithorn on Monday, but I don't feel that I can. I might say something to Willie that might better be left unsaid; all the talking in the world won't make it any better now."

"Perhaps not, but all the same I'd pitch into him, if I were you, just to do yourself good," said Bruce, but laughed as he said it at the idea of Mr. Bowman pitching into anybody.

"He has married her, Bruce; there's always something to be thankful for," he said. "But, lad, I've no business to sadden you with my vexations. I daresay you have your own to bear."

Bruce, with one of his characteristic gestures, gripped him by the shoulder with one hand, and with the other dashed something suspicious from his own eyes.

"Don't, Mr. Bowman. Who made all my troubles light? who's done everything for me? who made me? I wish I had a hundred thousand pounds or were the Prime Minister, that I could give you what you deserve."

"That's worth something, Bruce," said the minister, as he gripped him fervently by the hand. "Whatever I've done for you, and that's but little, you've repaid me a thousand-fold. Now let's talk of something brighter. So Dod's going over to the Frees, is he? What next?"

CHAPTER VIII.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON.

ONLY Bruce noted the undertone of sadness in Mr. Bowman's sermon next day. He preached from Job, and the words were singularly appropriate: "He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee."

Bruce sat in the precentor's desk, where he led the singing, and he observed that there were fewer nodding heads and a less drowsy atmosphere than usual in the little kirk. Dod Aitken was absent, but Marget Broon sat in her own pew behind her sister, wearing a new summer bonnet with big yellow strings and a perfect flower garden of yellow roses on top, also a new shape of garment never before seen in the Beild, and which greatly exercised the female portion of the congregation. It was the first specimen of the dolman, not long introduced by fashion.

Mr. Bowman could not refrain from a slight smile as he beheld this startling vision, and he wondered whether Marget had donned her bridal clothes beforehand. Bruce always

dined at the Manse on Sunday, and as a rule they spent the day together, taking a long walk in the evening sometimes to an outlying clachan, where Mr. Bowman would hold a cottage meeting, at which Bruce led the singing. It was a simple life, full of usefulness, and there were few things these two did not discuss. Mr. Bowman, a man of large culture himself, had carefully guided the taste of his young friend, and now had in him a congenial companion as widely read as himself, and possessed of a brilliant and daring imagination, which gave a peculiar zest to his conversation. There were few better classical scholars in the Howe of Drum indeed than the minister and the school-master of the Beild.

After their simple dinner that afternoon, they were sitting on the bench in the Manse garden enjoying a lazy pipe, when Easy came to the back door.

"There's a laddie frae Strathairn, Mr. Booman. Ye're to gang ower, he says, as shune as ye can."

"What for, Easy? Did he say what's the matter?"

"No him; it's Eck Doogal frae the Airn smiddy, an' he's gotten a new dug wi' him on a string—steelt it, I believe; but he says the Miss sent 'im for ye."

"Is he away?"

"Oo ay; an' I jist stappit oot to see what he was up till, an' it was as I thocht; nae shuner was he by the skule than he let the brute bang amang Jess Lockhart's hens. My certy, if Jess catches him Eck'll wish he

had tried some other play for Sunday efter-nune."

Having thus delivered herself, Easy withdrew, and the minister took out his pouch for another fill.

"It's a long walk on a warm afternoon, Bruce. I wonder what can be up?"

"Surely Mrs. Dempster has been better lately—at least, there's been no news of her in the Beild," Bruce answered carelessly, not feeling any special interest in the two ladies who abode alone in the old house of Strathairn.

"She has been much better lately," said the minister. "Miss Dempster hoped it might be the last attack. I hope it is not another, but I confess I was anxious when I saw their pew empty this morning."

"I didn't notice they were absent; but you see everybody. Shall I walk with you?"

"I'll be glad of your company across the moss, if you don't mind coming back alone."

"I don't, though I might go up to the Airn schoolhouse and wait for you there, if you like."

"I think not. I may be detained a while," replied the minister, and gave no other reason, though the true one was that after a visit to Strathairn he was not likely to be good company for anybody.

"All right," Bruce replied. "I'll cross the moss. Just let me go for Birse," Birse being the schoolmaster's dog, a poor specimen of a Scotch terrier, but as wise as most human beings in the Beild—a

good deal wiser, Bruce always said, than some of them. Between Birse and Raef, the Manse collie, there was a kind of armed neutrality, which caused their behaviour to each other to be marked by a great deal of dignity.

Raef was a powerful animal, who could very nearly have felled Birse with his paw; but what the terrier lacked in size and strength he made up by his impudence, which was colossal. He adored his master, however, and obeyed his every glance.

They walked leisurely across the green and brown stretches of the moss under a sky almost Italian in its blue softness, and somehow they had less to say than usual. The dogs ran on ahead, Birse setting up his yelp at the seamews which swooped gracefully overhead, their motions somewhat resembling those of the swallow. At the far side of the moss they parted, the minister continuing his way round the base of the East Corbie, while Bruce took a book from his pocket, and, throwing himself on the soft, dry, heathery bank, gave himself up to an hour's real lazy enjoyment.

Raef followed the minister; and Birse, after sundry investigations of rabbit holes, lay down too, with his white feet curled up under him and his eyes blinking, half open and half shut.

The minister had two miles farther to walk till he came to the Airn village—a mere handful of houses, much more picturesquely scattered than the Beild. The view from the Airn was really magnificent,

commanding the entire prospect of the fertile Howe of Drum, with its rich farm lands, bonnie woods, and limpid streams. Mr. Bowman did not go through the village, but taking a detour by the back of the smiddy, the home of the impish Eck, entered a little wood, which had a short cut through to the grounds of Strathairn. Strathairn was an old family house, which had belonged for generations to the Dempsters—lairds in the Howe since the early days of Scotch history, though the turmoil of the Covenanted times had considerably reduced their patrimony. The house, however, though it had once been in possession of Claverhouse's lawless dragoons, hunting for Dempster of Strathairn and Hackstoun of Rathillet, supposed to be in hiding in the neighbourhood, had not suffered at all, and was a picture of dignity and beauty and repose. It had a wide lawn before its curious old doorway, and its little diamond-paned latticed windows were wreathed in ivy of many centuries' growth. The place was well kept and looked an ideal home, in which happy and blameless lives might drit to a peaceful close. It was very familiar to the Beild minister, he being a frequent visitor to the ladies, who, though not his parishioners, preferred his ministrations to the slumbrous discourses of their own parish priest.

A douce man-servant dozing in an arm-chair in the hall woke up when he heard the minister's foot on the gravel, and came forward trying to hide his yawn.

"Well, Meldrum, how are you to-day?"

said the minister kindly. "I hope your mistress is not ill again?"

"Deed is she, sir," replied Meldrum sadly, for he had grown grey in the service of the house, and its sorrows were his own. "A hantle waur than she's been for a twelmonth, an' Miss Dempster's sair putten about."

"How did she get it, Meldrum?" asked the minister as he hung up his hat. "It's long since Miss Dempster told me Strathairn cellars were empty."

"So they are; there hasna been as muckle in them as wet a dry whistle sin' last Mairtemas," replied Meldrum ruefully. Get it! Maister Booman, them that's set on't can get it, Guid kens whaur. I whiles say to Elspet that they maun be like Moses wi' the water in the wulderness—chap on the rock an' oot it flees. Stap in, an' I'll tell the Miss ye are here."

Meldrum held open the door of the library, and the minister stepped in. It was a large, low-ceiled, pleasant room, walls panelled in carved oak, and the furniture such as would have sent a lover of the antique into raptures over the grace of the spindle-legged chairs and the wonderful carving of the spoonbacks—to say nothing of the many-legged table in the middle of the room, and the cabinet, a gem of the Sheraton period, standing against the wall.

The minister was left some time to his meditations, which were of a character strangely mixed. He was glad of the little interval to recover himself from the heat

and fatigue of his long walk, and was still sitting with his arms folded and his eyes closed when the door was gently opened and a lady came in. Then he hastily rose, and there appeared on his face a curious expression, an indescribable mingling of yearning and stern restraint which almost amounted to pain. It had something of a reflex in the lady's face, though she was entirely self-possessed, and greeted him with the quiet courtesy habitual to her. She was no longer in her first youth, but looked her eight-and-thirty years to the full. She had a tall, slender, and spare figure, robed in a simple black gown; a grave, somewhat large-featured, but attractive face, the eyes large, grey, and expressive, indicating both soul and individuality; her brown hair, which had a natural wave in it, was dressed becomingly, and was worthy of admiration. Euphame Dempster looked what she was—a gentlewoman, natural in appearance and manners, and who owed nothing whatever to the charm of art.

"I am afraid you have had a very long, weary walk, Mr. Bowman," she said, and her voice was singularly sweet. "I hope you will forgive me having sent so unceremoniously for you; but I felt that I could no longer bear it alone."

The minister deprecatingly waved his hand.

"Miss Dempster, say no more. It is a great deal to me that you should have thought of me in your trouble," he said, a trifle formally, to hide the real emotion

which surged within his breast. "When did this unhappy outbreak take place?"

She did not immediately answer, but walked slowly to and fro the room, and he observed that her hands were extremely nervous in their movements, and that her strong mouth trembled more than once. Watching her, at once so womanly in her pain, and yet so brave to endure what had been a lifelong humiliation and sorrow to her, the minister's expression changed to one of tenderness, so marked and unmistakable that, had she but glanced at him, the secret of his inmost being must have been laid bare to her at once and for ever.

CHAPTER IX.

ACROSS THE RUBICON.

"**I** BLAME myself entirely," she said at length. "She has been well so many months that I was thrown quite off my guard. Last Tuesday I went to Wester Cairn to inquire after Lady Leslie, who has been so ill, and when I returned I found that my mother had ordered the carriage. Meldrum said she had gone to make a call at Fordoun. That I thought quite unlikely, it being nearly two years since we had any friendly intercourse there. My mother never forgave the Colonel, you know, for having told her bluntly one day that she should be regarded as an irresponsible person and placed under restraint. As the evening wore on I got frightfully anxious, as you may know, and sent Meldrum to Fordoun. As I expected, she had never been there. You can imagine my state of mind, as I did not know what direction to go in search of her. Between ten and eleven o'clock at night the carriage returned; they had never been farther than the Blackwater Inn, Mr. Bowman, at the

west side of the Corbie. The rest you can guess."

Her colour painfully rose. Long experience of a bitter curse had not lessened its sting. Euphame Dempster was a proud woman, and this was a genuine martyrdom to her.

"And what explanation did the groom give? Could he not have come home sooner?"

"He couldn't; he is quite young, and of course when his mistress ordered could only obey. If Meldrum had been at home the carriage would not have been taken out, but he was at the Airn making some garden arrangements with Dougall; and of course after my mother got a certain amount she lost her self-control, and nobody dared touch her till she fell asleep. Then they lifted her in of course, and drove home. I feel very bitter at the landlord of the Blackwater. Our sorrow has been the gossip of the country-side too long for him to plead ignorance. It is a shameful affair altogether, and I sometimes feel that I cannot bear it much longer, Mr. Bowman. I have not the patience I should like to have with my mother, and I wished to ask you whether you think I ought to take the advice so many friends have given, and place her under restraint."

The minister perceived that her long patience and tenderness, at which many had marvelled, had been more sorely tried than usual, and he was hard put to it to keep his sympathy within due bounds.

"What is her condition now?" he asked, evading her question at the moment.

"Prostrate. Doctor Cumming was here this morning, and he says she is very ill indeed. Although it grieves me to see her apparently so spent, anything is preferable to the scenes we have witnessed this week. You have seen her in delirium before, Mr. Bowman, but she has never been so bad. Both the doctor and I were convinced that she must be getting secret supplies, and we at last found out that the new kitchen-maid—an Airn girl too, Mr. Bowman—had been fetching it to her. Of course she left the house the moment we discovered it. Oh, what a curse it is! It has changed my mother's very nature. You cannot remember her as I do, when I was a young girl, before my father died. No one who did would recognise her now."

She appeared to find relief in talking; the shadow on her brow grew less dark, the stern strain of the mouth less marked.

"Would you like to come up? I wish you would. It is a part of my grief that my mother can scarcely suffer me in the room; she regards me as her enemy. Of course I know it is but the frenzy of a disordered brain, but it is at times hard to bear."

She took a step to the door and opened it, the minister following her silently. His lips were sealed; words of commonplace sympathy seemed out of place—anything else he dared not utter. Never had he felt the hardness of his position so keenly; and he

told himself bitterly, as he followed her upstairs, her soft skirts brushing him at every step, that it would have been better to have disregarded the summons or sent an excuse. He could not offer the ordinary pastoral comfort, or even the sympathy of a friend, when his heart was full to overflowing of something else, which threatened to sweep him before it like a great flood.

These thoughts were interrupted by their entrance into Mrs. Dempster's bedroom, which, directly above the library, corresponded with it in size. The bed, a large four-poster, stood out towards the middle of the room, and propped high among her pillows reclined the old lady, looking worn and spent indeed, though her black eyes were more restless in their movements than those of a weasel. A scowl of indescribable dislike contracted her brows when her daughter entered the room, but when she saw the minister behind it passed, and a silly simper, like the bridling of a bashful school-girl, took its place. She had always been a vain woman, coquettish by nature, and in her unlovely age had not outlived her weakness.

"Dear me, Mr. Bowman," she said shrilly, "that I should have to receive you here is far from what I should like, but that is how I am treated in my own house by the limmer I have borne. She shows gentlemen in upon me without ceremony, without so much as asking whether I want a clean bedgown or mutch."

This was embarrassing. Euphame shut

the door, and went into the adjoining dressing-room. Mr. Bowman approached the bedside and sat down. Thinking her daughter out of hearing, Mrs. Dempster raised herself on her elbow and became extraordinarily confidential in her manner.

"It's a wonder she let you up. She's an awful woman, Euphame Dempster—a perfect deil in petticoats. She keeps a blue deil there in the wardrobe to torment me, and lets him oot in the night-time to bite me an' nip me. I'm a puir auld woman no long for this world, an' she'll gie me no peace. Could you no gie her a word, Mr. Bowman? She's fell fond o' the men. She might keep the blue deil shut up if you telt her."

Mr. Bowman heard at this moment the quick shutting of a door, and felt relieved to think that Miss Dempster had gone out of hearing. He sat a minute in awkward silence, feeling how vain it was for him to say anything rational to a creature evidently so distraught.

"Your daughter is your best friend, Mrs. Dempster," he did say at length. "When you are well again you'll be the first to say it."

"She has gotten roond you too wi' her witch ways," she said fretfully. "Naebod'y'll believe how she ill-treats me. She's put away Janet Bogie, a kind-hearted Airn lassie, the only cratur in the hoose that wad do a hand's turn for me. I say, Mr. Bowman, would ye do something to save an immortal soul, an' keep a puir decent body irae the blue deevils? Jist bring me

a moothfu'—a teaspoonfu' would do. My very inside's torn for want o't. Oh, dear Mr. Bowman, bonnie Mr. Bowman, jist a drap to save my life—an' half the revenues o' Strathairn will be yours. I can mak' anither will an' leave it a' past Euphame, an' if she dinna treat me better I will."

The minister was again at a loss what to say, and felt how useless was his presence, almost worse than useless, since it gave Mrs. Dempster an opportunity to rail against the daughter who had given up her life to watch and tend her. When the old woman saw that nothing was to be got from the minister she relapsed into sulky silence, relieving the monotony by making grimaces and tearing the trimming of her nightdress to shreds. Though her mind was painfully active her body was evidently far spent, her face being absolutely colourless and her lips blue and pinched-looking. The minister, who had sat by many death-beds, thought her end could not be far off. She made no response to his kind words of farewell, and he went down the stairs sadly, scarcely knowing what words of comfort he could take to the riven heart of the woman below. She awaited him in the library, where Meldrum had carried the tea-tray, and placed it on the table in the window.

"Well," said Miss Dempster, regarding him with a mournful, steadfast look as he entered. "You have seen a pitiful change in my poor mother, Mr. Bowman?"

"I have; she appears to me like a person mortally stricken. Yours is a sore grief,

Miss Dempster. I can only commend you to consolation higher than any to be found on earth."

It was a speech common to his cloth, but it fell with deeper meaning from his lips, which were singularly free from such set phrases. It was a case, however, beyond human help, and he spoke from the sincerity of his heart. One tear rolled down Euphame Dempster's cheek, and her strong hands trembled as they busied themselves about the tea-tray.

"Life is very hard, Mr. Bowman," she said. "I—I am afraid I have lost my hold of the consolation you speak of—at least, it seems to be too far off and shadowy to be of any use to me in my trouble."

These were sad words, yet were they re-echoed by the heart of the man who heard them. How often had he, even while striving to administer the consolations of religion to those in trouble, felt that his own extremity was almost beyond them! That very morning, in his own pulpit, had he not preached a strength and courage in which his own soul lacked sadly, and for which even yet his conscience smote him?

"I can re-echo your words, Miss Dempster, being in sore trouble of my own," he said, wondering if it would comfort her to know how fully he could enter into her deep depression of soul. She turned round slightly, pausing in her womanly occupation, and said with a gentle interest,—

"Sore trouble, Mr. Bowman? I am sad to hear that. I should have thought that you

in the Beild Manse lived the quietest and least troubled of lives; is it not so?"

Then all at once, without let or hindrance, and with a deal of quiet passion which carried them both like a flood, he poured out his troubles to her, beginning at the very beginning, from the old college days when money had been so scarce, and his father grudged him every penny for his clothing and his keep. It was a moving tale to which Euphame Dempster listened, her woman's heart melting within her for very pity of this noble soul, upon which the load of human circumstance had pressed so heavily and long, until it was well-nigh crushed.

"I have forgotten myself sadly, I fear, Miss Dempster," he said, catching himself up at last with a faint melancholy smile. "I ask your pardon. Seeing your heroic bearing of a great sorrow made me mindful of my own, and I was fain to unburden my mind. Pray forget it."

"Why should I forget it?" she asked, with a curious thrill in her voice. "It has helped me already; it will help me, and make me ashamed of my own fretful lack of patience. Now I understand many things, Mr. Bowman, and I honour you as I have never honoured you yet."

High rose the red flush to the minister's brow, and his eyes grew luminous with the light of the passion in his soul. Suddenly he rose to his feet, for he felt that if he remained a moment longer in the presence of this dear woman, he must destroy his

own peace of mind, and perhaps hers, for ever.

"Why such haste?" she asked in mild surprise, and, lifting her head, looked him full in the face, he returning that look as fully. Then he turned about quite silently, and went his way without a word of good-bye; nor did she seek to detain him. Only when he had clean gone away out of the house she laid her head, so tired with long vigils and much weary thought, down upon the table, and her tears fell. Why she wept she knew not, since in her heart there was also a secret joy.

For in that long look the man's heart had not been hid from her. What the issue might be she knew not; but to Euphame Dempster, from that golden Sabbath evening, the world became a new place, whose dark shadows were illumined by a light which Death itself cannot quench, even the light of Love.

CHAPTER X.

MORE SORE HEARTS.

TOWARDS seven o'clock, sweeping the moss with his field-glass from his own back door, Bruce Rymer beheld Mr. Bowman flying across it like a man pursued, his long legs taking gigantic strides, his coat-tails flapping behind him, and his eyes persistently bent on the ground. Somewhat amused though not greatly surprised at the sight, which was not indeed unusual, Bruce locked up his house, called the alert Birse, and went out to meet him. But by the time he got round to the moss road the minister had cut across in a slanting direction, and was making for the Whins. A trifle disappointed, Bruce whistled to his dog, and sauntered east the Beild without any definite object in view. Presently his heart began to beat more quickly and the colour to press to his cheek as he saw in the distance, coming towards him, the figure of Jeanie Morison. She wore a summer gown of some soft pink material, and a white hat with roses wreathed about it—a fitting garb for one so young and bonnië, and one

which enhanced all her winsome beauty. Birse ran barking to her joyfully, and she stooped down to pat his rough head, and to speak a kindly word to him, as she was wont to do to all who came near her.

She had one of those sweet natures that shed a natural sunshine about them as they go; and in all the Beild, with its lying and its much evil speech, there had never been an ill word or a harsh one spoken of Jeanie Morison. It would not have been suffered in the place. She met Bruce frankly, and with a warm sisterly clasp of hand. She loved him dearly, as the playmate of her youth, and was very proud of him too, believing him capable of great achievements.

"Isn't it a fine nicht, Bruce? I'm gaun west to the Whins to see Nanse Wricht. Where's the minister?"

It was a natural question, it being known in the Beild that their Sundays were usually spent together.

"He had to go to Strathairn," replied Bruce, and he took his eyes discontentedly from Jeanie's sweet face, which was more dear to him than she knew, and it was an intolerable thought to him that she had bestowed her love unworthily on Erskine Nicoll, who appeared, if all stories were true, to prize it but lightly.

"Oh, I hope Mrs. Dempster isna bad again," said Jeanie. "I missed them frae the kirk this mornin'. I say, Bruce, wasn't Mr. Bowman grand this mornin', but he vera near made me greet. We are weel aff in the Beild to hae sic a minister."

It is impossible to set down here the sweet quaintness with which the Scotch, her mother tongue, fell from Jeanie's lips. There are such as call our dear Scotch vulgar, and truly in some mouths it might sound so, but not from the lips of Jeanie Morison.

"Can I walk west wi' ye, Jeanie?" asked Bruce. "I think the minister's in Nanse's."

"Oh, if ye like," replied Jeanie, with her bright smile; and they turned together, a fine, well-matched pair, as more than one remarked, watching them saunter up the road.

"When's the inspection, Bruce?" asked Jeanie, with her usual friendly interest in his concerns. "Is the day fixed?"

"Yes, the twenty-eighth, and the holidays will be in July this year, as the harvest's earlier. There'll be a new teacher in the Beild next winter, Jeanie."

"A new teacher!"

She turned her pink cheek to him, and lifted her sweet eyes to his in wonder.

"Where are you gaun, Bruce?"

"To the college in Edinburgh."

"To be a minister, Bruce?" she asked; and something of the brightness passed from her face, as if a sadder thought were suggested by the words.

"No me. I wadna be a minister for no man, Jeanie. I'll tell you what I think—there's few fit. Just look round on a' the parishes in the neighbourhood, Jeanie—Strathairn, Drum, Pitandrew, Cairndrum—an' is there one fit to hold a candle to our Mr. Bowman? Not one. I think a man should be better than the lave or he stands

up to tell his fellows how to live. What do you think?"

"Same as you, Bruce. Ay, there's few like Mr. Bowman."

"It's just to get a genteel living with the most of them," said Bruce savagely, having Erskine in his mind. "And the young ones are the worst."

"Then what are you gaun to be, Bruce?" inquired Jeanie gently; for the theme of ministers was not one on which she desired to enlarge, her heart having its secret sorrow concerning them.

"A doctor. I've dreamed on nothing else since I was a bairn, Jeanie; but I owe everything to Mr. Bowman," he said, with a full eye and a tender voice, for which Jeanie loved him. Ingratitude seemed in her eyes aye one of the blackest of sins.

"But I thought it took an awfu' money, Bruce—mair even than being a minister," she said doubtfully.

"So it does, but I'll attend the university in winter and work in summer," said Bruce, finding it sweet to tell Jeanie all the secret ambitions of his soul.

"Will you, Bruce? At teaching, I suppose?"

"Anything I can get to do. I'll take the harvest in the Beild afore I'm beat, an' there's plenty wad gie me a job for old times' sake. I thought on waiting till I had a bit more saved, but Mr. Bowman won't let me. He says it's time I was at it, for it's a hard study, and the older one is the stiffer is it to give the mind to new things.

It'll maybe take me a lot o' years, Jeanie, but I'll win in the end."

"Richt sure am I of that, Bruce," said Jeanie, with a pleased, proud smile. "My, how proud the Beild folks will be of Doctor Bruce Rymer!"

Bruce smiled a trifle bitterly, not daring to say that for one smile of hers he would barter the good opinion of the Beild from one end to the other.

They were coming close by the school now, and suddenly Bruce put a plain, blunt question to her, though he often wondered after where he got the courage.

"I say, Jeanie, will you tell me what is there between you and Erskine Nicoll? Are you to be man and wife?"

The sweet colour faded out of the girl's face, and her eyes became heavy with a mist of tears.

"Oh, Bruce, speir me onything but that! I dinna ken! I dinna ken!" she said distressedly.

"But he did ask ye, Jeanie?" pursued Bruce mercilessly, for at the bottom of this matter he must be.

"Yes; but that's long ago, an' I wadna haud him to it, Bruce, if he wanted to be free. I'm but a plain Beild lassie, an' he's very clever, and maybe could wale where he likes. Besides," she added, with a little upward movement of the head which showed another side of her character, "I'm no like some, that would keep a man to an unwillin' troth."

"Oh, the hound!" said Bruce, under his

breath. "If I but had him in my grip, I'd shake the cowardly conceit out of him."

"Wheesh, Bruce; it is a thing with which you hae but little to do," she said, with a great, quiet dignity which secretly amazed him. "An' you hae forced me to say what I ought not, which is neither kind nor friendly, an' I dinna ken what ye mean by it."

"Ye might ken then, Jeanie, that I wad gie ten years o' my life to hae ye plight your troth to me," cried poor Bruce, unable any longer to conceal his secret. "An' if I live I'll be even wi' Erskine Nicoll yet, an' I'll win you, Jeanie Morison, if man can do it."

Jeanie smiled, but sadly, and her tears now fell upon her delicate pink gown, making it wet as with the drops of a summer shower.

"Oh, Bruce, Bruce Rymer, ye cudna hae vexed me waur than ye hae, an' I'm glad ye're gaun to Edinburgh, where ye'll soon forget me, just as Erskine has done; but for that I wad hae been wae to lose ye frae the Beild. Ye'd better leave me now, Bruce, because I canna speak ony mair. I'll just tak' a turn across the moss afore I gang in to Nanse, an' guid-enin' to you."

She sped away from him; and much as he longed to follow her, he did not dare. So the second love story was revealed that Sunday night.

Bruce looked in at Nanse's; but finding Marget Broon alone there, only remained for a neighbourly word with Nanse, and then crossed to the Binns, where they said the minister had gone. Bruce was welcome in

most Beild houses, and he had no hesitation in walking into the Binns kitchen, which was quite empty, Beaton's Annie being at the byre, and Jock Christie, the foreman, who was her lad, waiting at the byre door till she would be through, and ready to go for a stravaig with him over the moss. The sound of voices guided Bruce to the parlour, where he beheld Binns and the mistress with the minister in close conversation.

"Oh, guid-e'en, Bruce; come in," said Mrs. Nicoll; while Binns, a small shilpit body, not much to look at, but very ill to live with, gave him a friendly nod. Though thus neighbourly enough welcomed, Bruce felt that he had interrupted a conversation which was not resumed. After a short space, however, Mistress Nicoll recurred to the subject.

"We're speakin' about Erskine, Bruce," said she, with that peculiar shrill uplifting of her voice characteristic of her when she alluded to her idol. "He'll be hame neist week, an' Mr. Booman's for him till preach in the Beild."

A kind of dry smile crossed Bruce's face, and he glanced a trifle sharply at the minister, wondering at what he heard. And it struck him that he looked very tired.

"I suppose he'll have to preach his trials somewhere, Mistress Nicoll?" Bruce observed, seeing something was expected of him. "But were I Erskine, I'd not be in a hurry to preach afore Beild folk. You ken them as weel as I."

"That's what I say!" said Binns himself, bringing down his fist with its striped wrist-band on the table. "Lat him mak' a fule o' himsel' some ither gate afore he comes here."

"I wonder to hear you, Dauvit Nicoll; an' I wad like to ken what for Erskine wad make a fule o' himsel'—he hasna dune't yet."

"Has he no? He's made a fule o' you, my 'ooman, mony a day syne; an' if he comes to the Beild a stickit minister, ye'll be cheap o'd."

A speech which showed that Binns had no ambition for his offspring, such as his wife had, anyhow—indeed, it was a real grievance to him that Erskine did not drive a pair at the Binns; but Shoosan being stronger-willed, and as persistent as the deil, had got her own way with the boy, which she was yet to rue. Matrimonial bickerings of this acid sort were as common in the Beild as bachelor men; therefore neither the minister nor Bruce were in the least put about by this passage between Mr. and Mrs. Nicoll.

"I want to go away for a few days, Bruce," said the minister presently; "and as Erskine will be here next Sunday, I thought he might as well take duty for me. I'll write to him then to-night. I suppose you are willing, Mistress Nicoll?"

"Deed am I, an' never heed Binns; when he canna thraw, there'll be something mair the maitter wi' him nor a sair wame."

She spoke cheerfully, and with an amount of quiet satisfaction which indicated that the vision of Erskine in the Beild pulpit

was a pleasant one. Her pride in her boy after all was something good to see; and the minister, thinking on the lad's silly talk when he had met him in the street in Edinburgh, hoped he would yet win sense and do credit to his mother, the apple of whose eye he undoubtedly was.

"I hear the examination's fixed, Bruce," said the mistress presently, regarding Bruce with an air of condescension which hugely diverted him. "Are the bairns weel forrit, think ye? an' do they read wi' less sing-sang? Erskine noticed it vera muckle when he was last here, an' said it was a peety ye couldna improve their accent."

Bruce faintly reddened. He was by no means even-tempered, and could hardly hold his tongue. Mistress Nicoll did not know that one day at the Fast holidays, when Erskine had gone into the school and begun to meddle with Bruce and his methods of work, the schoolmaster had shoved him out by the door, in front of all the bairns. The minister perceived that the mistress was getting on a bad tack for peace' sake, and so got up to his feet.

"All right, Mistress Nicoll, I'll write Erskine to-morrow morning. Don't look so glum, Laird," he added to Binns. "Think on the honour and glory of hearing your own son preach an eloquent discourse in the Beild pulpit!"

"Fegs! I'll no hear him, I'll sweer," said Binns, pulling his black forelock. "His mither'll be swelled eneuch wi' pride to need her ain seat an' mine too."

It was impossible to help laughing at this, but the mistress only regarded her plain spouse with mild pity, as one who would not open his eyes to his mercies.

"We'd better be going, Bruce. I suppose you came seeking me, didn't you?" said the minister.

Bruce nodded. They bade their neighbours good-night, and went away.

"When did you take it in your head to go away, Mr. Bowman?" asked Bruce, directly they were without the gates. "You are going to Pithorn, I suppose?"

"No, I'm not—at least, I may go down first. I suppose I must go sooner or later. I must get clean away from the Beild for a bit, Bruce. I can't stand it any longer."

Bruce, though secretly amazed, forbore to ask any questions, nor did it occur to him to connect this hasty decision with the afternoon visit to Strathairn.

"I'm not going to ask you in to-night, Bruce," said the minister, after they had walked in silence the little distance between the Binns and the Manse. "I'm not fit company for anybody; but you'll excuse me, won't you?"

"Can't I be of any use, or do anything for you?" asked Bruce, his soul yearning over his loved friend.

"Nothing, lad, but leave me alone. Stay, you can pray for me if you like, for I'm in that mind that I can't pray for myself."

"Don't let it weigh you down like that, sir," said Bruce pleadingly, thinking only

on the trouble at Pithorn. "They're not worth it—not a soul of them."

"It isn't that. I'll maybe tell you some day, Bruce, but not yet. Good-night, my lad, good-night."

He wrung his hand fervently, and walked through the Manse gate without looking back. Bruce, sorely troubled in his mind, went into his own house, broke up his peat fire, and set on his porridge-pot abstractedly. In a while he went out again, down to the foot of the garden, and looked over the low boundary wall, from which he could quite well see the front windows of the Manse. There was a white blind in the study window, and when Bruce saw the shadow on it his heart leaped to his mouth. For he saw plainly that Mr. Bowinan sat at the table, with his arms folded and his head bent low on them. It was almost more than he could bear; but having been dismissed, he dared not intrude. But that night Bruce Rymer never closed an eye.

CHAPTER XI.

ERSKINE NICOLL'S TRIALS.



ON Tuesday morning Jess Lockhart, cleaning the windows of the school-house, beheld the Binns gig with the piebald pony drive down to the Manse gate, and there stand in waiting for somebody. She instantly suspended operations to go and interview Peter Christie, the Binns halflin, who was in charge thereof, wearing his Sabbath jacket over his moleskin waistcoat.

"Whaur are ye for, Pate?" she inquired anxiously. "Is the minister gaun frae hame?"

"Ay, I've to tak' him till the twal train at Kirklands, an' it'll be ane or I get hame to my denner."

"Is he for Pithorn, d'ye think?" inquired Jess, wiping the point of her nose with her duster, which being saturated with whitening wrought a change in her complexion.

"I dinna ken, Jess. Ye can bide or he comes oot an' speir," said Peter, who had no manners to speak of, and never made any unnecessary display.

"The minister's Easy gey close, Pate.

I saw her at the well no an hoor ago, an' she never said Minister. It's no neeborly."

"Some folks waur for clashes than ithers, Jess," said Pate suggestively, and at that moment Easy appeared carrying a by-ordinary large portmanteau, whereat Jess positively glowered. Being offended with Easy, however, she stepped back to the schoolhouse dyke, against which she leaned with her arms folded across her ample bosom, ready to take an inventory of the entire proceedings.

It was not to be thought that so rare an occurrence as a hurried jaunt of Mr. Bowman should be allowed to pass unnoticed, and presently the schoolhouse dyke had its row of interested watchers speculating on the affair after the manner of their kind. Easy, with a lofty look of unconcern, pushed the portmanteau in at the back of the gig, and then brought out a plaid strapped up together with a stick and an umbrella.

"An' there's his lum hat-box," said Jess excitedly. "It's a flittin'; mebbe he's g'wa to be mairret!"

All his goods and chattels being stowed away, the minister came out last, said a few words to his housekeeper, with whom he shook hands, putting something into her palm as he did so, and jumped into the gig, just as the children swarmed out of the schoolroom door for their "leave." Bruce, observing the gig, had let them out ten minutes earlier than usual, to say good-bye to Mr. Bowman, and he strode across the playground and over the road to do so.

It did not occupy long, and though the ladies ranged along the dyke strained their ears they could not hear their talk, and presently Pate Christie said "Gee up!" to the piebald, and the little gig rumbled off, the minister waving his soft hat amiably to his interested neighbours.

As Bruce expected, he was waylaid by Jess and her friends.

"The minister's for jauntin' the day, surely. Whaur's he aff till? an' wull he be hame for Sawbath Day?"

"No, he won't," replied Bruce. "He's away to France."

And with a laugh he escaped into the schoolhouse. Before one o'clock it was through the Beild that the minister was away to France, and it was the unanimous opinion that he had no business to take such a serious step without due announcement and provision. It was astonishing the sudden concern for their spiritual welfare which sprang up in the Beild now that they were without a spiritual adviser, and Tam Pitbladdo, the postman, who was the ruling elder, threw out sundry dark hints about the bar of the Assembly, which were only partially understood by the most of those who heard them, and were therefore received with awe. The only person who knew where Mr. Bowman had really gone was Bruce, and he was not likely to let on; it gave him a kind of inward satisfaction to see the Beild clashers nonplussed for once.

As the week wore on the unjustifiable absence of the minister was somewhat lost

sight of in the middle of another tremendous excitement which sprang up about Friday, that Erskine Nicoll was to preach in the Beild kirk on the Sabbath Day. This, in the eyes of Tam Pitbladdo at least, was the crown to the week's wrong, and it was as good as a ploy to hear him in his own shop on Saturday night, as he weighed out his butter and cheese and tea, never too absorbed to let the scales balance a hair's breadth too much—Tam being notorious for his jimp weight, but having a monopoly of trade in the place could laugh at complaints.

"If Erskine Nicoll thinks I'm gaun to tak' up the Buik till him, an' staun or he swaggers up into the poopit, he's mista'en," he said firmly. "I'll bide in my bed wi' a sairheid first; but I'll no dae't."

"Oh, there's plenty'll be betherell on Sawbath, Tam, jist for the fun o' the thing," said Big Sandy Morison, who, attracted by the crowd in Tam's shop, looked in, though he was on his way to Bawbie's. He was standing at the very outside of the door, but, being so tall, could look right over and down on the bald head of Tam, as he stood in his grimy, dirty apron and sleeves behind the counter. Tam was a bachelor man likewise, and abode with his mother, who was too old to redd things up, so that the shop was an eyesore to sundry housewives, and they would have removed their custom had there been anywhere else to take it.

"Ye'd look weel yoursel', Sandy," cried somebody. "Wull ye tak' Tam's place if he dinna turn up?"

"Oo ay. I'm no a kirk-ganger, but I'm gaun to hear Erskine. I'm thinkin', Tam, ye'll need to bring over the skule furms; there'll be sic a crood."

"Dad the fear o' that, man," said Tam sourly. "Wha's gaun to listen till an impident gowk like Erskine Nicoll? Wha's he, I shuld like to ken, that he shuld preach till his betters?"

All the same, Big Sandy was right. There never had been such a crush in the Beild kirk even on the induction Sunday, and though the school forms were not requisitioned, every pew was crammed to its utmost capacity. In spite of his protestations, Tam was present in his Sunday broadcloth, now growing a trifle green, with the kist creases in the breeks and across the back of the coat as usual. Every Beild cratur that could walk or hirple, except Binns himself, was in the kirk that bonnie summer morning. No, stay; somebody else was absent; and the first thing Bruce noticed when he sat down in the precentor's box was that Jeanie Morison was not in her accustomed place. In the second back seat on the right-hand side, just before the minister's Easy, sat Mrs. Nicoll, with a stiff black silk gown on, a yellow straw bonnet with magenta velvet ties, and lavender kid gloves, which was considered a most indecent exhibition on a Sabbath Day. While Binns at home was smoking unlimited pipes of black tobacco, and expectorating through nervousness to such an extent that the fire nearly went out with the deluge, his wife,

serene and ineffable in her conscious pride and belief in her son, sat bolt upright in her seat, except when she gave her gown a bit rustle for the benefit of those near at hand, and flourished her scented hanky above her magenta strings—the proudest mother and happiest woman in all the Beild kirk. She felt when she looked round on the crowded kirk that it was worth all she had suffered at the hands of the unsympathetic Binns, and that she had nothing else left to wish for in this world.

The jingling bell rang in, and though it was customary for Tam Pitbladdo to bring up the Book before the last twang, the vestry door never opened, and a visible excitement trembled over the entire congregation.

The reason of the delay was a war of words between Tam and the young probationer, because Tam had laid out the minister's old pulpit gown instead of the new one, and Erskine had flatly declined to wear it. It ended in victory for Erskine, and presently, three minutes behind time, and looking very hot and excited, Tam opened the vestry door and marched out with the Book, which he laid down on the cushion with a bang which made the dust rise quite distinctly, and caused sundry nudgings, while Big Sandy audibly requested Leeb to observe how Tam's birse was up. I fear there was but small reverence abroad in the congregation, to whom the sight of Erskine Nicoll in the Beild pulpit was more of a ploy than a religious exercise. Had Mr. Bowman realised the feeling of the place regarding

Erskine, it is certain he would not have allowed him to fill his pulpit.

Tam came down the stairs slowly, and stood back in the passage, which was most unusual. It was evident he did not intend to shut the pulpit door on Erskine; as he remarked afterwards, "he had to draw the line some gait." But Erskine was quite equal to shutting the door on himself, or doing anything else, and he emerged out of the vestry door, looking well, even his enemies were obliged to admit, in the flowing robes which were so becoming to their own minister. Erskine was big and well made, and had a ruddy, open countenance, an abundance of yellow hair, and a light blue eye which gave him a particularly innocent and childish look. Standing directly above Bruce Rymer, the contrast between them was distinctly marked, and there could be no doubt where the intellect lay, if outward appearances are to be trusted. But Erskine was beyond doubt "a bonnie man," as they said in the Beild; his skin was like milk and roses, and he had a fine, loud, ringing voice, which filled the kirk.

Mrs. Nicoll, wee, wizened body that she was, not given to exhibitions of emotion, felt her eyes growing wet as he stood up to give out the psalm, and felt angry with herself, for it was no occasion for tears, and she feared the neighbours would see them. Although the circumstances were admittedly trying, Erskine did not betray the smallest nervousness, either in voice or look. He

gave out the psalm and read it calmly, in a straight, even voice, in which Bruce listened in vain for some sympathetic modulation—and so throughout the service. Everything was done decently and in order, and with the sermon nobody could find fault. It was well expressed and well delivered, none of the heads or points forgotten; but it did not contain a single original thought, or a word which could thrill or touch the heart. He delivered it in the same high, clear, even tone from start to finish, and long before “thirdly” half the heads were down on the board and the familiar smell of Tam Pit-bladdo’s extra-strong peppermints pervaded the drowsy air. After all, the show had been a trifle disappointing. Erskine did nothing exciting, did not even advance a single doctrinal point on which Tam and the Session could meet to discuss.

Mrs. Nicoll was a trifle disappointed at the extreme haste with which the congregation dispersed, as she had pictured herself holding a kind of congratulatory levée at the kirk door. It was a grievance of Mr. Bowman’s that the congregation dispersed with too much haste. It was a common sight to see the lads, with one leg outside the seat, standing with hat in hand while the Benediction was being said, and before Amen they were out the door. Long before Erskine had got into his long black coat, which he thought became him mightily, the entire congregation had dispersed, and only his mother waited for him, though some looked back as they went down the road, and Jess

Lockhart had her nose glued on to her kitchen window. Bruce, who had a kindly, generous vein in him, went up to Mrs. Nicoll as she stood at the door, and said to her pleasantly,—

“You’ll be a proud woman to-day, Mrs. Nicoll. Erskine did well, and he wasna nervous. Had I been in his shoes, I couldn’t have been so calm.”

“Them ’at *can* dae needna be nervish, Bruce,” she said with dignity. “Yes, Erskine did well, an’ I wish his gowk o’ a faither had but heard him. Ye’ll tell him what a fine discoorse we had, Bruce, for he winna believe me?”

“Oh, I’ll tell him; an’ so will many more, I make no doubt.”

And just then Erskine came round from the side door, followed at a dour distance by Tam, with his nose in the air.

Bruce smiled, and offered his hand to his old friend, determined not to let any spirit of rivalry make him act dog in the manger.

“Well, Erskine, you’ve got your trial over, and finely too. Man, how did you feel? I was a bit nervous myself, till I heard you speak.”

“What was there to make anybody nervous?” queried Erskine loftily, as he shook hands but limply. “I didn’t do justice to my subject. You see, in a place like this, one always has the feeling of preaching over the people’s heads.”

It was just the sort of speech to make Bruce put up his back, which he immediately did.

"There was a wheen o' them sleepin', onyway," he said, in his broadest Scotch. "I gied a bit nod mysel' when I lost the thread o' your discourse. I never fand it again, though I tried hard; but that was maybe my faut, as I'm a Beild body like the lave."

Erskine did not like sarcasm, and never knew how to reply to it.

"Come, mother, and let's home," he said imperiously, and turned his back on Bruce, which did not put him much about, as he went laughing in at the schoolhouse gate.

CHAPTER XII.

YOUNG AMBITION.

ERSKINE NICOLL had been at home a week and had not been east the Beild—in other words, he and Jeanie Morison had never met. The Professor with whom he was on such good terms had a house at the coast about three miles from Pithorn, and in a week he had been there three times. When Saturday night came a minister from Edinburgh arrived at the Manse, which meant that Mr. Bowman would not be at home for another week at least.

Just after milking time on the Saturday night, Mrs. Nicoll was electrified to behold Leeb Morison, Big Sandy's wife, coming up the front garden at Binns. She went to open the front door to her, feeling inwardly somewhat perturbed, though she was too diplomatic to show it. Leezbeth was dressed in her best, and, so far as the mistress could judge by her face, did not seem to be in an ill key, which she quite expected, believing she had come to interview Erskine concern-

ing Jeanie. But Leeb had had too much to occupy her that week to think as much about Jeanie as she might otherwise have done. Leezbeth was the same figure of a woman as her sister Marget, only better-looking, and could look you straight in the face, which Marget couldn't, on account of the cast in her eye.

"Guid-e'en, Shoosan; I houp you're a' weel," she said, in neighbourly enough fashion, which relieved the mistress so much that her manner became quite effusive.

"We're a' fine, thank guidness; hoo's a' wi' yoursel's, Leezbeth?" she said affably. 'Come in to the ben end; the kitchen's aye ower thrang at this time.'

"I cam' roon' expeekin' to find ye in the byre, Shoosan; but Beaton's Annie tells me ye dinna milk noo. D'ye lippen her an' her mither to measure and strain the milk an' a'?"

"Ay, I've had my day o' the byre, Leeb, an' I'm takin' my idle-set noo, which Erskine says I've airnt."

"Maybe, though some o's that's airnt it disna get it taen," said Leeb drily. "Losh! Shoosan, whaur's the bed? I never heard ye'd potten't awa'. Whaur do you an' Dauvit sleep noo?"

"Up the stair," replied Mrs. Nicoll, looking round with great pride on the space formerly occupied by the box bed, and which now contained a mahogany cheffonier with a glass back.

"My certy, you're braw," said Leezbeth rather drily, yet not with that extreme

acerbity which Marget must have exhibited at such a sight.

"When did ye get this mighty fine business? The news is no east the Beild yet."

"It only cam' the day. Erskine bocht it in the Kirklands. He said it wasna fittin' that we shouldna hae a room in the hoose withoot a bed in't."

"Um! how does Binns like to see a muckle-lookin' gless whaur his bed was?" inquired Leezbeth interestedly. "There's no the like o' this nearer than Strathairn, I could wager; the very minister hasna a gless back till his sidebrod. Eh, Shoosan, ye're an unco 'ooman, an' if ye heard a' they say i' the Beild ye'd be mad, but I never meddles wi' business that's no mine. I'm aye tellin' Mag that; but, certes, she's gotten her hands fou noo. Ye've heerd the news, I suppose?"

"No; whatten news?"

"That Mag's gaun to be mairret. That's what I'm here for the nicht—to bid ye, you an' Binns an' Erskine, on Thursday aicht days at aicht o'clock."

"Bid's till what?" inquired Mrs. Nicoll, in a dumfounded voice, by no means comprehending her neighbour's meaning.

"To Mag's waddin'. Her an' Dod Aitken's gaun to mak' a match o't, an' it's to be in oor hoose Thursday aicht days—that is if the minister's hame, no onless."

"Od save's a', Leeb; it's lees you're tellin'."

"Is't lees? I wush it was," said Leezbeth,

with some bitterness. "I said till her she has lookit lang an' liftit little. I wadna pick the cratur up wi' the taings; but Mag's set on him, an' mairret they're gaun to be."

Mistress Nicoll was not that taken up with her own affairs that she could not feel a lively interest in this exciting piece of news, which had been so well kept by the parties concerned that Leezbeth's bidding was the first inkling anybody had of it. And Mrs. Nicoll was the first to hear it, Leeb having come direct to her out of compliment to Dauvit's standing in the place. There is a good deal of etiquette of a kind in the Beild, especially regarding such family events as death, birth, or marriage, and any breach of the same is immediately resented, and not quickly forgiven. I could tell you some queer tales anent that, but must get on with my story.

"Jeanie's to be the best maid, and Mirren Tosh's makin' her a book-muslin frock wi' a pink sash. Naething'll ser' Mag but a new drab silk made in the Kirklands. But the titbit o'd a's aboot Dod. Ye'll no guess it, Shoosan, so ye needna try."

"Tell me it then, if I canna guess. I hinna muckle to say, Leezbeth, for I'm fair dumfoondered. Marget and Dod Aitken! Certy, I never heard the like o'd."

"Ye may say'd. Aweel, last Sawbath nicht, the same nicht Erskine preached—an' fell weel he did it, Shoosan, I'll say that for him, though there's a heap o' lees gaun through the Beild aboot his sermon—

weel, that nicht, after darkenin', Dod slips ower to Mag. It was a' settled atween the twa some afore this of coorse, an' he has his stockin'-fit wi' him—you've heard that among the clashes afore noo, Shoosan—an' in the stockin'-fit hoo muckle, think ye?"

"Eh? I dinna ken!" cried the mistress, leaning forward panting in her eagerness.

"A hunder an' thirty-twa pounds, seeventeen shillin's, an' aichtpence!" said Leezbeth with exultation, for this fact, which she now announced for the first time, by her sister's permission, redeemed the bridegroom from the reproach of being a complete wastrel, and had been the sole means of reconciling Leezbeth herself to the wedding.

"An' Mag says she wadna wunner but there's mair. Wad ye 'a' thocht it, Shoosan?"

"'Deed I wad not. Ye wadna gie tippence for Dod as he stands, even in his Sawbath claes. Weel, weel, this is news, an' nae mistak'! Surely no mony folk ken, or Beaton's Annie wad hae heard it in the milk-hoose or aboot the doors?"

"I tell ye naebody kens. Ye're the first I've telt an' the first I've speirt. I'm gaun doon to Andra Wricht's noo. Eh, wummin, I wish Nanse could 'a' gane, puir body! D'ye mind hoo blithely she danced when you an' Binns were mairret? No that'll it'll be news till them, for Mag telt Nanse afore me."

"Ay, ay; sit a wee, wummin; it's no often ye gie's a look in," said the mistress pressing. "I'll bring the cheese an' the scones, an' a bit o' Erskine's Edinburgh shortbread. He's no a bad laddie; he aye minds his mither."

"An' weel he micht," said Leezbeth fervently. "I wadna mind a nip o' the shortbreid an' a drink o' milk. No, thank ye, I'm no for whusky. I've ower mony hooses to gang till. I say, Shoosan, d'ye think that I maun bid the minister's Easy?"

"Deed I dinna, for if Mr. Booman bides till his tea or supper, or whatever it is you're goin' to hae, it's no to be expeckit he shuld like to eat wi' Easy; she's but a servant when a's dune, Leezbeth."

"I'll hae to think ower't. But you an' Binns an' Erskine'll come, I houp?"

"Oh, Dauvit an' me'll come," said the mistress, as she opened a drawer and carefully unrolled the shortbread from one of Dauvit's red-and-white handkerchiefs. "But I dinna ken aboot Erskine; he's awfu' thrang wi' the Morgans—Professor Morgan, ye ken, o' the university; he's there the day."

"What aboot that? I'm faur frae believin' what they say aboot Erskine—that he's chockfu' o' pride, an' looks doon on the Beild. Jeanie wadna think it a ploy at a' withoot Erskine."

A speech which showed that Leezbeth still believed absolutely in Erskine, and thought he and Jeanie as chief as ever. It was a kind of painful moment for the mistress,

and she was some glad to go to the milk-house for a jug of milk for her neighbour, and when she returned they began to talk of something else.

Having drunk a good tumbler of milk, and praised the shortbread as much as was necessary, she departed over to Andra's, leaving Mistress Nicoll in a mixed frame of mind.

Though she had never spoken Jeanie's name to Erskine, she saw quite well that he was very lukewarm concerning her, never having noticed even her absence from the kirk. And as Shoosan Nicoll was a woman who could not brook any uncertainty of mind, she determined to get his views that very night when he should return. Leezbeth's urbanity did not in the least deceive her, and she feared to think of what might happen when the angry mother should be compelled to see the slight offered to her bairn.

To rid herself of these uncomfortable thoughts, she went out to seek Binns, who, as usual, being a very strict master, was superintending the suppering of the horses; and having found him, electrified him with the invitation she had just received.

Binns was a man of few words at all times, unless when roused, when he could command a choice of language quite startling. His only comment was a slow grin, which overspread his unshaven face and gave it a very comical look. Binns, like most other Beild men, the minister and Bruce excepted,

regarded shaving as a duty incumbent only on Sabbath Days. By Saturday night he presented a very shaggy appearance, and was not an object beautiful to behold.

Knowing very well there would not be much opportunity for private talk after Binns and all the men and Beaton's Annie should be indoors, the mistress put a little shawl over her head and went a bit over the fields to see if she could meet Erskine coming from the Kirklands. She had to go a good way before she saw through the gloaming his long black figure striding up the end riggs of Greig Watson's potato-field. It being Saturday night and midsummer, the last train from east the coast was of course a good few minutes late. Erskine walked swinging his arms, his soft, round, clerical hat drawn over his brows, and his eyes fixed on the ground, as if in deep meditation. He never saw his mother until she was quite close to him, at the slap in the hedge through which he had to crawl into the road.

"Hulloa, mother, did you think I was lost, or is anything up? The train was twenty-five minutes late at Pithorn station. It'll be near midnight before it gets to Edinburgh."

"It's Saturday nicht. No, I didna think ye were lost; but I want to speak to ye, Erskine. Leeb Morison was ower the nicht, biddin' us to Mag's mairrage; an' wha d'ye think she's gan to mairry but that wastrel Dod Aitken? At her time o' life too! She nicht think shame. It's on Thursday aicht

days at Leeb Morison's, an' she wants us a' to come."

Erskine did not at once reply, and an expression of faint contempt crossed his face. By contrast with the home he had left, how vulgar and coarse seemed everything belonging to the Beild, even his mother, though she was dressed as best she knew how to imitate a lady, because he desired it.

Poor Erskine! he did not know that that feeling of contempt for what was genuine and simple marked him off from the roll of gentlemen for evermore. He was but a silly laddie, without experience of life, and unable to distinguish between the false and the true gentlemanhood.

"It should be stopped by Act of Parliament," he said crossly. "Surely you won't go?"

"No gang! What for no? I wadna missed for onything; it'll be the grandest ploy. There's something I want to ask you, Erskine. Are ye off or on wi' Jeanie Morison?"

Erskine reddened, and flung up his head with a slightly defiant air. "What do you mean, mother?"

"Eh? fine ye ken what I mean," she replied, more sharply than she had spoken to him for a long time. "Ye were thrang aince. Did ye ever say mairrage till Jeanie? That's what I want to be at."

"If I did, it was but in fun, and when I was too young to know my own mind," said Erskine gloomily. "A man ought not

to be held to such silly speech before he has had any experience of life."

"Then you've changed your mind about Jeanie, an' dinna think she's the wife for ye noo?" said his mother shrewdly, wishing to come directly to the point.

"Do you think yourself, mother, that she'd be a suitable wife for me? Of course she's a very nice girl. I have no fault to find with Jeanie, but the Beild's the place for her."

"I'll no say ye're wrang, Erskine. But, megstie me! if ye pit a slicht on Jeanie Morison, there'll be nae livin' in the Beild. But I say, Erskine, I'll stick to ye through it if ye'll tell me the truth. Are ye thinkin' on ony o' the Miss Morgans?"

Mistress Nicoll said this in rather an awe-stricken voice, regarding the Professor and his daughters much the same as she regarded the Queen on the throne.

Erskine hesitated a moment, looked sheepish, and finally told a big lee. "Yes, I am; I believe I've but to ask Lily Morgan an' she'd say aye. Would I not be worse than a fool to let such a chance slip by me? Why, if she were my wife, my fortune would be made, and I'd soon be in a professor's chair myself."

"It wad be fair fleein' in the face o' Providence," she assented eagerly. "But, mercy me! ye ken what the Morisons are; as weel hae a regiment o' savages on yer tap as them."

"I wish you'd find out how Jeanie is disposed, mother; perhaps she won't really care."

"Vera weel, my man; I'll dae that. Meantime, were I you, I wad be some friendly at the east end, an' no jist gie them a fricht a' at aince. Leave the rest wi' me."

CHAPTER XIII.

BRUCE UNDERSTANDS.

BRUCE RYMER had just let the scholars away, and was turning the key in the school door, when he beheld a pony-carriage coming up the Beild, and recognised Miss Dempster as its sole occupant. She did not often drive through the Beild on a week-day, and it just passed through his mind that she might be seeking Mr. Bowman. He stepped across to his own garden, and busied himself among his flowers till she came up, when she stopped her pony with that pleasant smile of hers which made everybody feel at home. Bruce thought as he raised his cap to her that she looked younger than he had ever seen her look, and attributed it to her hat, a brown confection trimmed with yellow, and singularly becoming. Bruce, as was perhaps natural, being a foundling and having had no upbringing to speak of, was ultra-radical in his views, and hated "gentry" with a mortal hatred, Miss Dempster being the only exception. She was real gentry, if to count your forebears

centuries back is any claim to that distinction ; but she had the simple manners and the true heart which our Tennyson has told us are worth all the coronets or Norman blood in the world. Bruce had got to know her well too, through having had the bairns two successive years a picnic to Strathairn, and she had never failed to treat him like an equal and a gentleman. There were some of smaller claim and greater pretensions who regarded the Beild schoolmaster as the dirt beneath their feet ; and you should have heard Bruce on them. Even Mr. Bowman, though he felt he ought to have reproved Bruce both for mimicry and harsh criticism, never did anything but laugh when he started.

"How do you do, Mr. Rymer ? I haven't seen you, except in church, for ever so long," she said, leaning out of the phaeton with outstretched hand. "But you look well, and I know are always busy. How very pretty your garden is ! We can't grow phloxes like that at Strathairn."

"I'm fond of them, Miss Dempster ; they're friends to me, and I'm always among them, and they repay me by growing," Bruce answered, and hesitated just a moment, not sure whether he ought to ask for Mrs. Dempster or not. But Miss Dempster solved the difficulty herself.

"I'm very sorry I shall not be able to have the children at Strathairn this year, Mr. Rymer, on account of my mother's health. We are going off to the seaside as soon as she can be moved."

"I am sorry, because the reason is a sad one," replied Bruce, in his sympathetic way, which made him very winning at times. "But the picnic has been talked of already, and we can go to the Den in carts which the farmers will lend, though I know very well the children will not enjoy themselves as they did at Strathairn."

"Oh yes they will. I shall give five pounds to help. Oh, don't say anything; it is very little indeed," she said quickly. Then, glancing towards the Manse, she put a question. "Is Mr. Bowman at home?"

"No, he isn't," answered Bruce, in considerable surprise that Miss Dempster should not have heard of the minister's absence. "He's been away nearly a fortnight, in London actually; but he's coming home to-night by the seven train, if the London train's in time to catch it."

Miss Dempster certainly looked thunder-struck, and there was a curious red spot on her cheek which Bruce could not help wondering about. It looked an angry sign, but when she spoke he knew there was no anger in her thoughts.

"I had not heard. Was there any sudden call for him?"

"No, though he went off suddenly enough. He seemed to take it in his head all at once," said Bruce. "It was the very best thing he could do. He needed the change, and I gather from his letters that it has done him a great deal of good."

"I am sure it would. I thought he must be either ill or absent, that he had not come

again to Strathairn to ask for my mother. You will see him to-night, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, I'm going down to meet him."

"Are you? You are close friends, aren't you? I have heard that."

"He has made a man of me, Miss Dempster. As for him, I think him the only perfect man that lives. He's too good for the place he's in, or for any place indeed. If you knew him as I do, his big, tender, manly heart—oh, I can't speak about it!"

Bruce was half ashamed of his own emotion, which, in an unguarded moment, had found such passionate utterance, because he was feeling unusually sore for a sight of his friend. It did not displease Miss Dempster, however, though it maybe astonished her. The red spot burned redder on her cheek, and her eyes grew so luminous that she was fain to turn her shapely head in another direction.

"I know he is good," she said very softly.

"Will you tell him to-night that, if he is not too tired to-morrow, he might come over to Strathairn, and he will be driven home? My mother would like to see him."

"I won't forget, Miss Dempster."

"Good-bye, then. When my mother is better, I hope you will come and see us. I mean what I say," she said, and her hand-clasp was warm enough to send a thrill to Bruce's heart. He did not guess that it was partly given for his friend's sake. Bruce, like most passionate, high-spirited natures, was secretly very soft-hearted, and amenable to tender influences of every

kind. His loneliness was known only to himself; his longing for the companionship, the presence of mother, sister, or wife, was at times intolerable. He was a man to make women intensely happy in all his relations with them, and yet he had not one bound to him by any tie in the whole wide world. For this reason, perhaps, he had poured a more passionate devotion on the minister, who had been so much to him all his days. He walked down to the Kirklands, accompanied by Birse, who never liked to miss a ploy, and was in waiting at half-past eight, when the train came in. Directly he saw Mr. Bowman alight, he despatched a boy to the Gallows Inn, as had been arranged, to put a horse in a trap. Then he ran along the platform, welcoming Mr. Bowman with an eagerness and intensity which made sundry smile.

"Man, I thought the day would never come!" he said, his face all aglow. "How fine you are looking—as brown as a berry!"

"I am fine; it has done me a world of good, Bruce. You look well yourself, and I'm glad to see you last. I'll get the news as we go. I suppose we can walk?"

"No we won't; they're getting a machine at the Gallows Inn. It'll be ready when we get there," replied Bruce. And taking the minister's portmanteau, which had increased in weight since it left the Beild, and felt as if it were stuffed with books, he walked along manfully, his whole face beaming.

"And not a living soul knows where you've been," he said gleefully; "except

Miss Dempster, and I told her myself to-day."

"Was she in the Beild?" inquired the minister, in rather an odd voice.

"Ay, she drove through, just as the school scaled. I think she was seeking you, and she bade me ask you to come to Strathairn to-morrow, if you were not too tired."

"Have you heard anything about Mrs. Dempster?"

"Not a cheep; but Miss Dempster says she isn't well, and that they're going to the coast. Well, and how did you like London?"

"I liked it well, Bruce; I liked it well, and I would not mind having work laid to my hand there. It is a place that lifts you out of yourself with its vastness, and makes you feel that your own troubles are but small. Ay, Bruce, it has done me good, and I think I'm a new man come back to the Beild. I've gotten a sermon ready for Sabbath which will maybe keep them awake for once."

"The old man was good enough for me," said Bruce affectionately. "Well, there isn't much news, except that Marget Broon and Dod are going to be married next Thursday. They were cried in the Airn kirk last Sunday, an' Marget went to hear her ain cries, which is a scandal in the Beild."

The minister laughed, and the two friends, being come to the Gallows Inn, climbed light-heartedly into the waggonette, and

talked and laughed like schoolboys as they drove over the steep road to the Beild. It was almost dark when they got there, but sundry were on the outlook, and there was much waving of aprons and bonnets to welcome the minister back again. And as his eye rested on the whitewashed walls of his own manse, embowered among its green, and looked away across the solemn wastes of the moss, a sudden gratitude filled his heart, and he felt glad that he had come back to his home.

Easy, looking as much gratified and excited as befitted a woman of her years and position, was stationed at the gate to receive them, and her greeting of her master as he shook her heartily by the hand was just like her.

"Weel, I houp you're dune stravaigin' for a whilie. Your tea's a' ready, and a Binns chuckie dune to a turn. I suppose the maister'll eat wi' ye."

Easy only suffered Bruce's constant presence in the Manse, and deemed it her duty to occasionally remind him that it was a great privilege to be on terms of such intimacy with the minister, in which he so entirely agreed that he never resented it.

Although he had a great deal of pride, it never extended in the direction of the minister's Easy, at whose plainest and sourest speech he never took offence.

The minister quite affectionately regarded his little sitting-room, and sat down in his armchair with a sigh of content.

"There's no place like home, and kent

faces are the best, Bruce," he said softly. "After all, the Lord is good, and His mercy endureth for ever."

The Binns chuckie, a present from the mistress, was here borne in triumphantly by Easy, decorated with crisp slices of home-fed bacon, and smelling so uncommonly good that the minister made haste to draw in his chair, and took the carver, bidding Bruce do the honours of the teapot.

Easy was an excellent cook, but she had taken extra pains that night, and the table was a sight to a hungry man, who had not taken kindly to English cookery in a second-rate hotel. The scones were white and delicate, and, spread thick with Mistress Nicoll's cream butter, melted like honey in the mouth; there were crisp oatcakes too, and buttered toast, and new-laid eggs—all so tempting they hardly knew where to begin.

"We are but puir craturs after all, Bruce," said the minister, after he had eaten silently for some minutes—"sore putten up and down by our creature comforts. A meal like this eaten at a man's own fireside wad gar him mak' peace wi' the vera deil."

It was but seldom the minister spoke so broadly, and Bruce knew that everything homely and Beild-like seemed dear to him at the moment, and smiled a bit smile to himself as he deftly cleaned the chuckie's wing on his plate. They were not much more than half through, and Easy had brought in a fresh supply of hot water and a big gingerbread cake to finish up with, when there came a quick noise of hurrying

feet and a loud, impatient knocking at the door.

"I'll say you're no in," said Easy in an aggressive whisper. "Some lees are better than the truth. Rise, if ye daur."

The last sentence was addressed to her master, and she slammed the parlour door and held it with one hand, while with the other she gingerly opened the front door.

"Is Mr. Bowman in?" queried a shrill, pain-wrung voice, which caused the minister to leap to his feet. "Oh, tell him I must see him at once!"

Easy let go the parlour-door handle and opened wide the other one, and Miss Dempster of Strathairn staggered in; and to the no small amazement of Easy and Bruce, the next sight seen was Miss Dempster, who seemed sore distraught, falling into Mr. Bowman's very arms.

"Oh, Mr. Bowman, come, come with me!" she moaned. "My mother has left us again, and was last seen on the moss at the darkening. We fear—we fear that she has fallen into the Warlock's Well."

Bruce was too much taken up with Mr. Bowman to pay much heed to the import of Miss Dempster's words, and presently he slipped out of the room, signed to Easy, and shut the door.

"Guid sakes!" said Easy; "if that's no a sicht!"

"Wheesht, wheesht, Easy; it's neither your business nor mine," said Bruce, a trifle unsteadily, and passed bare-headed into the open air. The scales had fallen from his

eyes, and he called himself a blind fool. His eyes were smarting with tears which had a sting in them, for he felt himself shut out from the inner sanctuary of his friend's heart, and knew that he was supplanted for evermore.

CHAPTER XIV.

SORROW IN STRATHAIRN.

THAT night a strange scene was witnessed on the Beild moss. News that Mrs. Dempster was lost there, in what condition was easily guessed, quickly spread, and half the place turned out with lanterns, it being a very dark night, clear and dry, but starless. The Warlock's Well, which Miss Dempster had mentioned in her incoherent speech, was a great, deep pool made by a peat cutting, now full of dark water, of depths unknown. It was a fearsome place to drown in, and had been fenced in, though but frailly, after a little Beild bairn had wandered there, and his body found floating face upwards, his little hand still full of the wild flowers that had tempted him to the brink. That picture was still fresh in the minds of those who carried the lanterns, and there fell a deep silence on them as they cast their light on the well. Mr. Bowman had entreated Miss Dempster to remain in the Manse, promising that the search should be thoroughly organised; but



"THEY SPREAD THEMSELVES IN LITTLE GROUPS OVER THE MOSS" (p. 127).

she could not rest, and she was among the first, her face white and drawn with misery, to bend over the edge of the eerie Warlock's Well. But nothing was to be seen; the waters lay dark and still, preserving their secret, if they had it, well. They were not content with mere looking, but dragged the depths of the pool with grappling irons—all to no purpose.

"She is not there, Miss Dempster," said the minister, turning to her with relief in his face. "Come back, dear lady; I assure you everything has been done."

But the black depths of the Warlock's Well seemed to have a strange fascination for Euphame Dempster, and she could scarcely take her eyes from it. They began to spread themselves in little groups over the moss, for there were many other pools and treacherous bits of bog, where a woman, not mistress of herself, might come to sad grief.

Bruce was as active as it was his nature to be, keeping at a distance, out of an odd delicacy, from the minister and Miss Dempster, who remained together. And as it happened, he was with the little party among whom were Laird Nicoll and Sandy Morison, who found what they had come to seek. They were far over, near the Corbie side of the moss, though about a quarter of a mile from the Airn footpath, when they saw a black object on the ground, lying partially in a shallow ditch, in which there were about ten inches of water.

"Here she is," said Bruce, and there

was a tremor in his voice, for even a strong man may be moved at the sight of death in such a form.

One of the boys held aloft the big stable lantern Binns had brought with him, and he and Bruce, stooping down, turned the poor lady over, in the faint hope that the spark of life might yet remain. But the body was quite lifeless, and the manner of her death was not difficult to guess. She had missed her footing, and fallen on her face. Being unable to rise, she had simply been suffocated in a handful of water which would scarcely have drowned a mouse.

"I'd rather 'a' loupit in the Warlock's Well when a's dune," said Sandy Morison gruffly. "Puir body, to be chokit in a saucerfu' o' water like that; it micht be a wairnin' till's a'. Wha's to tell the Miss?"

They looked, as was somehow natural, to Bruce, who immediately took the lead.

"Let's carry her up the brae a bit, an' here's a clean handkerchief we can spread over her face," he said very gently. "An', neebors, maybe we need not say anything about how she was lying. It might be easier on Miss Dempster if she thought she had died naturally, or at least only from exposure."

"A guid idea," said Binns approvingly. "It's a kindly lee. I'm ready."

They arranged the poor old lady's soiled garments about her, put her bonnet straight on her poor white head, and Bruce with his own hand spread the clean linen on her face.

Then, while the others bore their burden up the brae to the shelter of the dry stone dyke skirting the Corbie, he strode back the way he had come. The minister saw him some distance off, and gathering from his walk and demeanour that he had something to tell, went a few steps to meet him.

"We've found her near the Corbie," he said, with a nod. "No, not alive—quite dead."

The minister went back in silence to the stricken woman, and took her on his arm.

"They have found her, my dear," he said, with a great tenderness, which made Bruce's heart melt. "It is God's will, and she is better where she is."

Miss Dempster gave a little gasp, and then, with one look at the minister's face, straightened herself and said in a calm voice,—

"Take me to her. I am glad she is found."

When they came to those who were keeping vigil by the prostrate silent form, Miss Dempster bent down, and, lifting the white linen cloth, looked at her mother's face, and though she trembled greatly, spoke calmly to the men, who, listening to her and looking at her face, would have gone to the world's end to serve her.

"My kind neighbours, who have helped me in my extremity, will you help me to take her home?"

"Ay wull we," said Binns. "The puir leddy's but a licht wecht; a buirdly chiel micht carry her hissels'. If you'll help,

Sandy, we can tak' her hame to Strathairn atween's."

And so it was. The boy was sent back to acquaint the others with the result of the search, and the little company, bearing their sad burden, moved forward to the Airn path—poor Meldrum, who had come upon them, sobbing bitterly, for he remembered his mistress in her day of beauty and pride, and the shame of Strathairn was sore upon him. Miss Dempster herself wept none. She was very calm, very collected, seeming to think of everything; and when at midnight they bore the dead mistress of Strathairn to her own chamber, the first thing she did was to give directions for refreshments to be given those who had come.

"I shall remain here to-night, Miss Dempster," said the minister, before she passed up to do the last sad office in the upper room.

She assented gratefully.

"Yes, and ask Mr. Rymer to remain also. I particularly desire it."

So it came to pass that the minister and Bruce found themselves in the grey small hours of that July morning sitting together where they had never expected so to sit—in the library of Strathairn.

It was about two o'clock when she came down to them, looking like a ghost.

"All is done, and you must need your rest," she said gently. "Your room is ready. I thought you would wish to be together. We shall talk in the morning."

"I hope you will take rest yourself," said

Mr. Bowman, and Bruce wondered whether he should go out of the room or not, but finally remained, for which they were both grateful.

"Oh yes. I may not sleep. The sun will be up soon, and it will cheer me," she said with a faint smile, and bade them good-night.

It was not to be expected that any slept much in the house of Strathairn that night. Neither the minister nor Bruce closed an eye.

Miss Dempster did not breakfast with them next morning, but saw them afterwards as they walked together in the garden. It being Saturday, there was no hurry for Bruce going back to the Beild. In the course of the day some callers came to offer their condolences; and towards afternoon a cousin and his wife arrived from their farm-place on the farther edge of Magus Muir. This man, whom Mr. Bowman had seen before at Strathairn, did not favourably impress him, and he liked not his manner towards Miss Dempster. She was coldly civil to them, nothing more; and when they announced their intention of remaining till Monday, the funeral day, she did not even say she would make them welcome. When they arrived, Mr. Bowman and Bruce went away; the cousin, Gavin Dempster, showing them plainly he wondered at their presence and considered it an intrusion. He was, however, fairly civil to them before Miss Dempster, being secretly afraid of her. The wife was a vulgar person, with a great idea

of her own importance—a woman whom Euphame Dempster had always regarded as insufferable. Miss Dempster accompanied the two friends across the park to the wicket gate out of the Airn woods, and there bade them good-bye.

"I may come to the kirk to-morrow," she said, a trifle sadly. "It may be I shall be glad to escape the company of my kinsfolk, though it seems ungrateful of me to say it, and in the Beild kirk I know I shall be among friends."

She spoke with a pathos both felt, so much that they could say nothing in reply. But a hand-clasp and a long look can express much, and these were not lacking.

"Poor lady, poor lady," said Bruce, turning to look back at her tall figure as she moved away through the trees with her head bent towards the ground. "She is terrible forlorn, and I don't like those folk that have come from Magus Muir—do you?"

"Indeed I don't, nor do I know what they want at Strathairn at such a time," said the minister, quite hotly for him.

"They look as if they had some right to the place. Nothing could be put past Miss Dempster—could it?"

"Strathairn can't, if you mean that. The entail cannot be broken; it has been tried before now. The money might, and the old woman was not herself; but God forbid."

Bruce had his serious doubts, on which however he did not insist, knowing that Monday would settle everything. He felt sorry it was impossible for him to attend

the funeral, his school inspection being next day, and time too valuable to spare. He sent his regrets by Mr. Bowman, who went over immediately after his early dinner. There was a considerable gathering of folk—come to pay their respect though to the living rather than the dead, Mrs. Dempster having long alienated such from herself in her life-time. Miss Dempster's face lightened somewhat of its gloom when she saw the minister, and his heart leaped to see it, though it caused him much mournfulness also; for what, even though love existed, could Miss Dempster of Strathairn ever be to the poor minister of the Beild kirk—a man without purse or pedigree? The burying did not occupy long, the distance to the Airn kirk being but short, and thereafter the will was to be read in the library.

Mr. Bowman was not present at this formality, having stopped to inquire for a bedridden man, formerly a parishioner of his own, in the Airn village. About an hour after, as he came towards the front gates of Strathairn, he beheld the figure of Sir Ludovic Leslie of Wester Cairn driving his dog-cart furiously up the avenue. His face, always ruddy and well-favoured, was now angrily red, and when he saw the minister he pulled up his horse with a jerk which made him rear on his hind legs.

"Don't go up to that dishonoured house, Mr. Bowman, or you'll maybe be tempted, like me, to put your fist in the face of as damned a scoundrel as ever walked the earth."

"What do you mean, Sir Ludo?" inquired the minister, using the name by which the popular laird of Wester Cairn was known in the country-side.

"It's that Gavin Dempster I'm meaning—devil take him!" cried Sir Ludo, shaking his long whip, as if it itched to be about some one's ears. "The old lady's left him every copper, every acre of land not in the entail, and poor Euphame's gotten nothing but the bare standing walls of Strathairn. But I'll fight him for it, if there's law in the land, for honour's sake. I'll wrest it from him, if it should take a year's revenue from West Cairn to do it."

"God forbid that such injustice should have been done."

"It is done, sir," said Sir Ludo grimly. "I'm not a swearing man, Mr. Bowman, but there's times when it's the only language fit; so I just damned the villain before them all, and came away."

Mr. Bowman's usually gentle eyes flashed fire, his great right hand involuntarily clenched, and his mouth lost its expression of sweetness and became wholly stern.

"If there's justice, as you say, Sir Ludo, it can yet be done," he said.

"There's the rest of them coming. Are you going up? Tell the poor girl Lady Leslie will come over this evening. Oh, if I but had the blackguard in my grips, and that vulgar hizzie of his, as common as thistle-down! Good-day to you; preach a sermon on them, my man, and don't spare them."

Sir Ludo, still shaking his fist, rode on, and Mr. Bowman, wishing to avoid the mourners coming up the avenue, struck off into the path among the trees, and returned to the house by the back way.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS DEMPSTER'S EXTREMITY.

AS he came round the end of the house through the shrubbery he beheld Gavin Dempster walking on the lawn with the lawyer, Mr. Patullo of the Kirklands, and another man he did not know. He passed them by quite close, but they took no notice of him, and he walked straight into the hall, meeting Mrs. Gavin Dempster there, looking handsome enough in her rich mourning, and wearing on her pert face a look of defiant assurance.

"As there is no servant to take my message, madam," said Mr. Bowman, as he laid his hat on the table, "could I trouble you to tell Miss Dempster I would speak with her for a few minutes?"

"Your business, may I inquire?" she said arrogantly.

"Miss Dempster will not inquire what my business is, madam. I am an old friend of the family; if you will but convey my request, I shall be much obliged."

"You can sit down there then; there are lawyers in the library, and the drawing-room

is not fit for visitors," she said as insolently as she dared; for there was something in the minister's grave, stern face which awed her, lacking in all proper respect though she was.

He did not take the seat so rudely offered, but was still standing when Miss Dempster came downstairs, her long black gown trailing behind her, the muslin band at her throat not whiter than her face.

"Will you come up?" she said, without smile or greeting of any kind. "I have a little sitting-room upstairs where my kinsfolk have not yet intruded."

He followed her without a word; and when they had both entered the sunny little room which bore so many indications of the tastes and occupations of a true gentlewoman, she shut the door, turned the key in the lock, then sat down before the *escritoire* in the quaint corner window, and turned to him with a faint, wavering, dreary smile.

"There are things harder to bear than death, Mr. Bowman, and those we love can treat us cruelly. Has anybody told you about my mother's will?"

"I met Sir Ludovic," he answered, and could say no more, his throat being parched and his tongue tied, though in his heart surged a sea of tumultuous thought.

"There is nothing left to me but the standing stones of Strathairn, and such things as are heirlooms and come under the entail. Everything that can be converted into money she has left to my cousin, whom God forgive, for I cannot; and I am a middle-aged woman, with nothing at my fingers whereby

I can earn an honest penny. Did you think God could be so hard upon a single woman, who has wronged none, and has tried to do the duty as she saw it lying to her hand? You are a minister; perhaps you can make plain to me the Lord's dealing with me, for I am all at sea, and have no faith in God or man."

She spoke quietly, but the white, beautiful hands, which for nearly forty years had been so strong, as she said, to do the duty that lay nearest, and that had known no ministry but that of patient love, seemed to have become frail and weak, the bit of paper she had nervously grasped fluttering in them like a leaf in the blast. It was more than man could stand; so, forgetful of all save of his great love, Hugh Bowman got up to his feet, and, kneeling down before her, put his two strong arms round her waist.

"I must speak now, Euphame. I can no longer be silent. The love of my heart has already been revealed to you. If there is even a faint response to it in your heart, let it comfort you in this bitter hour. I am but a poor man, God knows, nor have I hid it from you—unworthy of you in a thousand ways; but what I offer is at least sincere. One of the barriers between us is swept away, and though I may regret it for your sake, I cannot for my own, since it has given me courage to speak."

He never looked nobler than at that moment, though upon his knees; and again the light seemed to shine in a dark place for the woman who listened to him. But she

put up one of her trembling hands deprecatingly, and with the other covered her face.

"Oh, Mr. Bowman, at this time! Is it not more of pity than anything else? I am a middle-aged woman, as I said, past my prime—penniless too, and I fear useless."

"Hush!" he said sternly, even in his tenderness; "not that, and the only woman in the world for me. I wonder at my own courage; I have so little to offer, while you are above me in station as in worth. The plain home and honest heart of a man whose endeavour, God helping him, will be to make you happy—that is all."

"It is enough," she answered him very low. "It is enough for me."

So that middle-aged pair, both of whom had known sorrow of the sharpest sort, opened their hearts to the one romance of their lives, and, though late, found it passing sweet.

An hour later Mr. Bowman left Strathairn, and, saying nothing even to Miss Dempster, walked across the fields to Wester Cairn. He saw the carriage leave the gates as he approached, and guessed that it was Lady Leslie bound upon her errand of mercy. It was now five o'clock, and Sir Ludovic was engaged with his steward in his business room on a rent question when the minister's name was brought to him.

"Oh, excuse me, Bailie," he said, jumping up at once, his mind more full of Euphame Dempster's affairs than his own. "Come up after dinner; I'll be at leisure then. I must see this gentleman at once."

"Very well, Sir Ludo," said the man, and took himself off. Sir Ludovic had changed his morning dress for his riding garb, in which he looked a handsomer man.

"Well, Mr. Bowman," he said, rubbing his hands together, "did you stick your fist in Guy Dempster's face, or what?"

"No, Sir Ludovic; I was glad enough to be spared coming in contact with him," replied the minister. "Can I speak to you on a private matter for a few minutes?"

"Yes, certainly; sit down," said the good-natured baronet affably, for he had a sincere liking and respect for the manly minister of the Beild. "Didn't you meet the carriage? Lady Leslie has just gone over to Strathairn, and she'll fetch back the poor girl, if she'll come."

"Are you Miss Dempster's guardian, Sir Ludovic?"

"Why no, not exactly, though my friend Dempster—as fine a fellow as ever breathed, and but poorly mated with her that's away—asked me to keep an eye on the place, and on his little girl. If I'd had a son of my own, Bowman, I'd have married the two; but, you see, it never came to pass. No, I'm no legal guardian of Miss Dempster's, though I have her interest at heart. But why do you ask?"

"I have come to you, because I believe you to be the most disinterested friend she has, to tell you that I have asked her in marriage, and she has accepted me."

"To-day?" said Sir Ludo, jumping to his feet and growing rather red.

"Yes, this afternoon."

The two men regarded each other steadily for a few seconds, and there was just a shade of suspicion in Sir Ludo's face.

"It's very sudden, and I don't understand it. Pardon me, Mr. Bowman, because I am an old friend of the family; but I hope you did not take advantage of her deep grief. Ah, ah—that is, excuse me, of course I ought not to have said that, but it's so damned sudden I couldn't help it."

"Miss Dempster has been aware for some time of my affection for her, though I never cared to dream of such a thing as marriage. But seeing her to-day, I found it impossible to keep silence; and I defy you, Sir Ludovic, or any other man, in like circumstances, to have held his tongue."

Sir Ludo smiled drily, and took a turn across the room with his hands behind his back.

"Does she—does she care about you then in that way?" he asked flatly, and the minister reddened like a school-girl.

"If she did not, Sir Ludo, I should not be here to-day."

"That being the case then," said the baronet, drawing in a chair with a great deal of noise, "we'd better sit down and talk it over, and take a sensible view of the situation. Firstly, then, Mr. Bowman, you may take it that I have no personal objection to you, for I have heard you are a scholar and I know you are a gentleman. But you and Euphame can't live on that. What's your stipend in the Beild?"

"Two hundred pounds and the Manse," said Mr. Bowman.

"Well, supposing that we lost the lawsuit, and that she had nothing but Strathairn, it would bring a hundred a year let furnished, and there's the farm Airncroach lets for another hundred—that's four. I daresay you could live, but not on the fat of the land. Ye maun get another kirk, my man, and that with speed; but I'm in hopes we'll gain the day. I'm for Edinburgh to-morrow to the Haldanes, my men of business, and we'll see what they say."

"If Miss Dempster is content with a plain way of living, which I think she would be, it might be better to leave things as they are."

Sir Ludo brought down his clenched fist on the table with a bang.

"Would it? and let that ill loon and his hizzie of a wife spend Euphame's money? If you fancy that gate, Mr. Bowman, I warn you, you and I'll no 'gree, and I'll feel it my duty to warn Euphame against you."

But the twinkle in his eye belied his words, and Mr. Bowman rose, feeling that he had a staunch friend in the bluff, plain-spoken, but truly good-hearted baronet.

"Won't you stay and dine? Her ladyship will be back by-and-by, and if she brings Miss Dempster with her so much the better. Did you hear whether Guy Dempster would leave to-day?"

"They were leaving, Sir Ludo, just as I did. No, thank you; I shall not stay to-night. It is time I was back at my own Manse."

"All right. Well, well, what changes folk live to see, Mr. Bowman! Man, I would like to see the villain ousted in open court. It's a clear case of undue influence, but I can't for the life of me imagine how or when the thing was done."

"They have always come a lot about Strathairn, Sir Ludo; and Mrs. Dempster paid them a long visit, don't you remember, in spring?"

"Ay, I do. It's a piece of black work, anyhow, and I for one will do my best to overthrow it."

He put on his hat, and walked with the minister to show him a short cut across to the moss, and his whole talk as they walked was of Guy Dempster's villainy and his determination to baulk him yet.

The evening was well spent when the minister entered his own garden gate. He could not help looking at the house with different eyes, as the possible home of the only woman he had ever loved. It was an unpretending house, but it had the look of a home, and was not without its picturesque aspect, embowered as it was among sheltering trees, and covered with roses which bloomed all the summer through, defying even the north winds which at times blew snelly across the moss. Easy, who came to inquire what he desired to eat, fancied he looked tired and sad, but attributed it to the sombre duties in which he had that day been engaged.

"Marget Broon was here, sir, an' I ken her errand, though she didna tell me. It's

till speir ye to the waddin'. I'm bid mysel'. It's an unco business, d'ye no think?"

"When is it, Easy?"

"Thursday nicht at aicht o'clock in Leez-beth's—a fell grand ploy tae, frae a' I can hear. Jess Lockhart says Weelum Birrel i' the Kirklands is gotten the order for the bride cake—thirty shillin's, or maybe twa pound."

The minister smiled.

"Jess is busy, as usual, I see. Well, while you are getting me a plate of porridge, Easy, I'll slip over to the schoolhouse. You can come for me when you're ready."

"Bruce's vera busy wi' the skeddles for the morn," said Easy suggestively, feeling that she had had a long day alone, and yearning to unburden her soul regarding Thursday's ceremonial. The minister did not take the hint, however, but went across to the schoolhouse at once.

Bruce was very busy among his school-registers, but jumped up, glad to see his friend, who seemed to have been long absent. As he looked at him, he thought that there was something different in his face, though he could not have put it into words.

"You're late, Mr. Bowman; have you just got back?"

"Only this moment. I have had an exciting and eventful day, Bruce."

"Have you?" inquired Bruce eagerly; "and what about the folk from Magus Muir?"

"You were right about them, Bruce. Mrs. Dempster has willed everything she could



"THE ONE ROMANCE OF THEIR LIVES" (p. 139).

to them, except the stannin' stanes o' Strathairn."

"Past her own daughter?"

"Ay, it's some hard, Bruce; but I can't altogether regret it, since it has given me something I might not otherwise have had. Miss Dempster has promised to be my wife, Bruce."

"I am not surprised; I saw how it was on Friday night," said Bruce, as he gripped him by the hand. "I don't know her very well, but I know you, and she is a lucky woman, as I've aye said any woman would be that got our minister."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MARRYING OF DOD AITKEN.

THE Beild was in a ferment. Long before eight o'clock all the bairns in the place, big and wee, congregated in the road before the Morisons' door; also sundry grown folk, chiefly women, who for reasons it would take too long to explain had not been bidden to the wedding. They were on the outlook for everything, though the bride was of course the principal object of attraction. She, however, having a good inkling of what it would be, had gone over to her sister's early in the day; and while they stood in a state of expectancy awaiting her arrival, she was being put into her new silk gown by her niece and bride-maiden Jeanie, assisted by two other lassies sib to the family. And it was no very easy job, for the Kirklands dressmaker, anxious to do credit to herself and the figure of her customer, had made it on the jimp side, and they were all red in the face before they got the waist buttons in. But after it was on, and Marget had taken a long breath and assured them "it wasna the least ticht,"

they could not but admire the effect, and say she was the bravest bride the Beild had ever seen. She had a broad lace collar round her neck, and a long gold chain, from which she had detached her father's silver turnip, lest it would make a baggy place in her bodice; and there was a bunch of pink cabbage roses for her neck and another one for her hair, which, when arranged by Jeanie, gave her quite a young and festive appearance.

By half-past seven she was quite ready, white gloves and all, and sat down with her lace-bordered handkerchief neatly arranged in her hand, entirely satisfied with herself. Jeanie looked as sweet as one of the new-blown roses at her belt, and the whole Morison household was in a complacent frame of mind. Leezbeth, who had been a bit touchy in the earlier part of the day, when in the thick of preparations for the supper, was now mollified, and came in, dressed herself in her wedding gown, a white rustling silk with a lilac stripe, which had been newly done up for the occasion, and looked truly imposing.

"Are ye a' ready? Ye're face's a thocht reid, Mag. I hope your body'll no burst ower your supper. Yes, it's very nate, but gie me room. The table's set; ye'd better come an' see't afore they begin to come. There's naeboddy here yet."

They all trooped down the stair at this, Marget holding her silk skirt and her white petticoat high in the air, revealing a bran-new pair of elastic-sided boots, with patent

toes, adorned by a pattern of white stitching. The supper-table, set out in the kitchen as being the largest place, was a sight to see. At one end was a huge sirloin of beef, roasted to a turn; at the other the beef-steak pie in its common Beild resting-place, a sonsy milk basin, whose brown outside Jeanie had ingeniously hidden by an arrangement of pink tissue paper. Then there was a ham and at least half a dozen fowls, to say nothing of a big duck, such as the dwellers in towns seldom eat or see. The dishes were chiefly willow-plate pattern, and the cutlery was some mixed; but of food there was enough and to spare.

"Beaton's Annie's to bile the tatties in the washin' hoose, an' they'll be ready on the chap o' half-past aicht," said Leezbeth. "I houp the minister'll no be late. There's somebody at the door, an' they're cryin' 'Poor oot.' I'll lay ye it's Dod."

"Let me up the stair afore ye open it," cried Marget distractedly, and flew off with more alacrity than might have been expected.

It was not Dod, however—only Bruce Rymer and his fiddle, both welcome guests at every Beild gathering; and as his eye fell on the winsome face of Jeanie, he could hardly muster the smile necessary for the occasion. Never had she looked so sweet and bonnie, and as he thought on Erskine Nicoll he ground his teeth.

And now the guests began to come in one after the other, till the whole company, thirty-six in all, were assembled in the ben end, where it was a tight fit, even though sundry

articles of furniture had been shifted to accommodate them. Mrs. Nicoll of the Binns was undoubtedly the grandest. She had on a black silk brocade with purple flowers which could have stood itself, and a white lace cap, such a thing as had never been seen in the Beild; also black silk mittens on her hands, through which shone sundry rings. Binns himself, out of pure thrawnness, had elected to come in his market suit of hodden-grey, with a blue-checked shirt and an old necktie; nor had he shaved since the Sabbath Day. Erskine, however, in all his glory, made up for his father's shortcomings, wearing his long-tailed coat and his white choker, also his hair parted in a new pattern up the middle. He had shaved off such slight pretensions to a moustache as he had possessed, and now tried to look as severely clerical as possible.

His demeanour towards the entire company was civil, but distant, as befitted one who was on intimate terms with a professor. But it had the opposite effect on the Beild folk from what was imagined or intended. It did nothing but raise their birse, every man and woman of them. They were not to be taken in by Erskine Nicoll, or anybody like him.

Punctually on the chap of eight the minister arrived; and Dod, looking wonderful spruced-up-like in his new shepherd's tartan breeks, clean white shirt, and black coat, stood up on the hearthrug before the minister, Wee Sandy Morison, his best man, with a queer grin on his face, beside

him. Amidst a dead silence the bride entered, in her sonsy grandeur quite eclipsing little Dod; nor was she too agitated to look calmly round her, observing the bunch of purple lilac in Shoosan Nicoll's cap.

Then the simple marriage service of the Scots Kirk began. Mr. Bowman was considered very fine at a wedding, and it was agreed that he surpassed himself that night. In about ten minutes it was all over. Marget was Mrs. Dod Aitken, and Dod was Marget Broon's man—the latter likely to be his appellation now to the end of his days. The signing of the register was a terrible business for the two, who were no scholars; and in the midst of it Bruce began to enliven the proceedings by playing a wedding march of his own composition, a kind of cross between a psalm tune and a Scotch reel, and the fiddle made them all lively. The whisky and bride cake were being handed round, and pretty soon the proceedings began to liven up, and sundry jokes were passed, some of them just on the broad side.

According to strict Beild custom, the bride and bridegroom did not take the slightest notice of each other, and received congratulations in a very off-hand manner, as if marrying were an every-day occurrence with them, and not a thing worth speaking about. Mr. Bowman unfortunately could not remain to supper, as a sick-bed required his attention, but promised to look in a little later. It was felt to be a kind of relief when he went away, for he always kept a

check on the bottle; and if Dod Aitken's marrying was not to be made an occasion for real, downright jollification, then nothing in the Beild was worthy of it.

Man and wife of course sat together at the table, and both made a hearty good meal. The supper was a grand success. To be sure, there was a shortness of plates and of knives and forks; but the folk waited with the greatest good-humour while Beaton's Annie washed them up in the back scullery, handing them in through the doorway as she dried them, and enjoying herself as well as any of them. When everybody had eaten, though not drunken, as much as they could hold, Bruce got up to propose the health of the newly wedded pair. He had a great gift of adaptability, and made himself peculiarly happy and acceptable always at Beild social gatherings. You see, he knew the folk well, and could handle them just as they required handling. In raw hands they were kittle cattle to deal with. His speech rather surprised Erskine Nicoll, both by its happy phrasing and its wit, which was quite genuine and made everybody laugh. Erskine put up his one eye-glass, and surveyed Bruce while he was speaking in a slightly supercilious way, which invariably put mischief into Bruce, and he could not resist a wipe at him before he sat down.

"Before I sit down, and apologising to Mr. and Mrs. Aitken for taking any name but theirs on my tongue on this great occasion," he said, with a twinkle in his eye, "I cannot refrain from expressing, what I am

sure is the opinion of one and all, our gratification at having in our midst a distinguished student, who, in spite of all his honours, is but a Beild laddie like ourselves; and though we who live day in and day out in our quiet village, which is some remote from the centres of learning and culture in which he is at home, we are fain to believe that the eye-glass, with which we are not familiar, and whose purpose we do not fully understand, hides a gleam of kindly feeling for Beild folk and Beild ways. Friends, I give you the health of Mr. Erskine Nicoll, student of divinity, and may he live to sit in a professor's chair, and be an honour to the Beild for ever and a day."

It was outrageous of Bruce of course; he had no call to give any such toast, but the deil had entered into him for the nonce; and it being perfectly plain he was taking Erskine off, the whole table went into a roar.

Erskine made haste to push his eye-glass into his pocket, and got up to his feet, very red in the face.

"I'm very much obliged to Mr. Bruce Rymer for his speech concerning me, and I'll have a word with him by-and-by, if he likes, outside, when I'll ask him what he means by his impudence."

At this, foreseeing some unpleasantness, Leezbeth spoke up:—

"Noo, lads, I'm for nae words here. Dinna be a gowk, Erskine Nicoll. It's only Bruce's fun. Tak' up the fiddle, Bruce, set the young folk a-dancin', an' let's hae nae mair o' this."

Bruce, a trifle sorry that he had thus pilloried Erskine before the company, did as he was bid at once, and an adjournment was made to the ben end, where the strains of "The Dear Meal's Cheap Again" soon made young feet and happy voices dance in tune. But Erskine remained as sulky as a big bear beside the old folk, who never moved from the bottle all night. Jeanie Morison was rather quiet and disheartened-looking; and after dancing one set of the reels and watching another out, she came slipping back to the kitchen and spoke to Erskine.

"Come on ben, an' tak' a turn, Erskine," she whispered. "Wha'd be cross wi' Bruce—a body kens his fun. Come on."

"No, I'm not coming; but if you'll come out to the garden with me," he answered, in a low voice which nobody could hear, "I want to speak to you."

Jeanie blushed a lovely red, and gave her head a little nod. Erskine understood, and followed her out to the back garden, which was a spacious place, in which there were plenty quiet corners. Erskine was going to do a very cruel thing, but was just in the mood for it. He meant to be off with Jeanie, and he kept saying to himself that it was the only manly and right course for him to pursue, since he had changed towards her.

"What did you think of yon at the table, Jeanie?" he began. "I'll be even with Bruce for it yet, confound him! What business has he to meddle with me? I leave him alone. But what can you expect from

a mere pauper, a fellow without any people?"

This nettled Jeanie, and she spoke up rather sharply for her.

"When you speak like that, Erskine, I think you deserve a' you get. Naeboddy in the Beild likes sic airs as you put on; and if Bruce was a puiers-hoose bairn, he's as guid, maybe better, than some that's no."

This was Erskine's opportunity, which he was not slow to grasp.

"So that's how the land lies. Bruce has put out my eye, Jeanie. Well, it's maybe better for us both. It was a mistake, that boy-and-girl nonsense, and I'm glad you are thinking no more about it. My future is likely to lie far enough away from the Beild, and I should never be able to make you happy. I wish you and Bruce luck, Jeanie, and for your sake I'll think no more of his rudeness to me to-night."

It was a bold stroke, but it had not quite the effect Erskine expected. It was too dark of course to see Jeanie's face, but it grew rather white, and a look came upon it so full of contempt that it was a pity he did not get the benefit of it. It was some seconds before she said anything, but when she did speak she left him in no doubt as to her opinion of him. She was a gentle thing, but by no means characterless; in fact, she had a keener vision and a nicer perception than most.

"Ye think yersel' a gentleman, Erskine, an' try to look like ane," she said quietly and coldly; "but ye'll never be that, though

ye live a' your days. Fine ye ken there's naething atween me and Bruce, but ye need an excuse o' some kind. But ye needna fash. I'm no daft aboot ye; an' I'll tell you what I think—Bruce Rymer has mair in his wee finger than you hae in your hale heid, muckle though it be; an' them 'at lives longest'll see maist."

She turned about quite quickly, and vanished from his side, her white skirts making a light spot in the darkness till she had gone within the house. Somewhat relieved, though smarting under her rather strong words, Erskine took a cigarette from his pocket, and thereby sought to soothe his ruffled feelings.

"The little spit-fire! Who'd have thought she had as much in her?" he said to himself. "I'm well rid of her. Now for Lily Morgan and success."

His dreams as he sauntered up and down the garden were all roseate, as those of youth are apt to be before experience disillusiones.

Dreams they were, and so far as Erskine Nicoll was concerned, dreams they were destined to remain.

Jeanie was more of a seer than she imagined, and the day came when Erskine thought with bitterness of her prophetic words.

Meantime, however, though her heart was secretly sore over the shattering of a girlish dream, she danced to the strains of Bruce's fiddle as if she had not a care in the world. And when somebody relieved him, and he

asked her for a dance, she gave him a smile which set his heart beating madly. Erskine saw this through the parlour window ; and, considering that he had of his own free will relinquished her to Bruce, the sight made him rather savage. And when his mother, missing him from the company, began to look about for him, he was nowhere to be found, having indeed gone back in the sulks to the Binns. So little was he missed that nobody even said, "Where's Erskine Nicoll?"

The fun grew fast and furious in the ben end, and in the kitchen the bottles became sadly reduced, the transfer of their contents having sundry effects on those who partook so generously.

In the midst of it all Dod and Marget slipped quietly away to their own home, and were never missed. So ended the marrying of Dod Aitken.

CHAPTER XVII.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

AFTER all these terrible excitements, the Beild settled down into a period of placid dulness, unbroken by anything more stirring than the harvest, which was early, owing to the fine dry spring and warm early summer. During the holiday months Erskine Nicoll was at home but little, visiting much with his friends the Morgans, through whose agency he obtained a holiday engagement to travel with the young son of a Perthshire laird through Holland. This engagement was not fully understood by Binns and his wife themselves, let alone the Beild ; but Shoosan was convinced that it was a terrible grand thing, and Binns suffered it because Erskine had not asked him for any money to go. Otherwise he said he did not think muckle of it, as folks are apt to do when they don't know.

The next upheaval in the place was the resignation of Bruce Rymer, which came upon the Board like a thunder-clap the week before the school closed in July.

These were the early days of the School Board, of which Binns was the chairman. Had it not been that he and Mr. Bowman kept the Beild right, there would have been queer ongauns in that Board, which was composed of ten members, very few of whom had any interest in the Beild, or who knew much about education. In spite of his nearness and his gruff ways, however, Binns was a most intelligent man, a terrible reader, and one who liked to understand what he took in hand. But he did not bother himself to study any question in which he had not a special interest, and that is why he never got to understand the ins and outs of Erskine's tutorship. As the lad had elected to cut himself off from the Binns, and did not disguise his contempt for the place, his father had washed his hands of him. Even poor Shoosan, feeling the gulf daily widening between them and Erskine, began to doubt the glory of having a gentleman son. But she would rather have died than admit as much.

Since the marrying of Dod Aitken and Marget Broon, a dryness had sprung up between the east and west end of the Beild—on Erskine's account of course, though Jeanie appeared as blithe as ever, and did not seem to suffer because it was all broken off. She had given her own version to her mother. It was secretly sore on Leezbeth, and she just left off going to the Binns, confiding to Nanse Wricht one night that it was "just as weel she shouldna get her tongue about Shoosan Nicoll's lugs."

The newly wedded pair, Dod and Mag, settled down doucely, and Dod speedily became a highly respectable member of society, attending the kirk every Sabbath Day, and eschewing Bawbie's at nights. Nor did he suffer thereby. Marget, being a wise woman, gave him his "drappie"—some reduced in quantity maybe, but of prime quality—at his own fireside; and Dod and she lived very cantily together, just as if they had done so all their days.

Bruce Rymer also took a holiday engagement of a less pretentious sort, money being precious to him; and in the second week of October he came back to bid good-bye to the Beild, previous to entering on his medical study at Edinburgh University. The new teacher, a married man, was by this time installed in the Beild—a grave, solemn-faced person, who as yet managed the Beild bairns in but a middling way. To fully master the intricacies of the Beild character, old or young, you have to be brought up in the place; no stranger has half a chance.

Bruce was made welcome by his friend Mr. Bowman at the Manse for the two days he proposed to abide in the Beild, and blithe were the two to find themselves cracking together again by the familiar fireside. The minister, since his love affair, as yet undreamed of by the Beild (that would be an excitement for them, if you like), had become a new man. He looked years younger; his step was blithe and buoyant, his eye bright and happy, his whole bearing that of a man to whom the world is a place worth living

in. Even the Pithorn troubles, by no means over, sat but lightly on him. Love, with touch of healing and of divine hope, had laid her finger on his sore heart, and lifted him to her celestial heights for ever. They were middle-aged people, and therefore not foolish; but they leaned upon each other with a great, quiet, trustful affection, which had made the desert blossom to them like a rose. The two friends sat far into the night, talking chiefly of Bruce's concerns, in which Mr. Bowman had a brother's interest.

"You'll do, Bruce; there's nothing you can't achieve in my estimation, and in you I see revived the ambitions of my own far-away youth. If only you keep your health you'll do—ay, you'll do, and finely too."

Bruce had no lack of enthusiasm in his own soul; still, it was honey sweet to him to hear such words of cheer from the lips of the friend he loved best on earth.

"Now, I say, we've talked about me and my concerns for three mortal hours, and never a cheep about you," he said. "Dare I ask when the wedding's going to be?"

"You may; but I don't know it myself, nor am I troubling my head greatly about that. By-the-bye, I'll be over the last week of the month. The case is to come on then in the Court of Session."

"Is it though?" asked Bruce, with intense interest. "Do you think there's any chance of the will being broken, and Miss Dempster getting her own?"

"Sir Ludo thinks so," answered Mr.

Bowman, with a smile at the memory of some of Sir Ludo's outbursts. "And I hear that Gavin Dempster is some doubtful, but means to fight to the bitter end. I'm not caring much how the thing goes, and truly I think Miss Dempster is of the same mind."

"I'm glad you've got Sir Ludo to fight for you then," said Bruce. "I never saw two such folk; there is not a worldly thought in your heads!"

"Oh ay, a few, now and then," replied the minister, as he watched, in unutterable content, the blue wreath curling upward from the new pipe Bruce had brought him.

"This is a grand pipe, Bruce, and so is the tobacco. Man, what a difference it makes to life! I hope you'll find it out for yourself some day."

"I've smoked many a good pipe in my time," said Bruce, with a twinkle in his eye, wilfully taking him up amiss.

"I daresay; but it's the other I mean," said Mr. Bowman placidly, not in the least put out. "When you meet with the woman who believes in you, and who out of love is willing to give herself to you without a question or a doubt, that's what'll rouse all that's best and heavenliest in you. I believe myself it's the means of grace God tries with most men,—through mother love first, then the wife; after that there's only the love of bairns, and if that fails to make a good man out of a middling one or a bad one, the devil's got him, that's what I think."

Bruce was silent, listening to his friend's speech as to a gospel, which indeed it was to him. But it was a theme upon which he felt shyly, and could not pass an opinion.

The early part of the next day Bruce occupied in making calls at the west end, giving Nanse Wricht a goodly portion of his time, and also crying in at the Binns, though not stopping long, as the Nicolls did not approve his new venture, Shoosan regarding it as presumptuous, and Binns as very risky, seeing he had a fixed income in the Beild and a roof-tree to himself. Then, after an early dinner at the Manse, the two strode over the moss in the fine, clear October weather, Raef and Birse couthie as of yore (the latter having found a temporary home at the Manse), fleeing on in front after the pairicks, and an odd grouse which had survived the August slaughter.

They were for Strathairn, where Miss Dempster was looking for them to tea. Though Bruce, shy as a school-girl over a love affair, almost feared to look at the pair, he could not help seeing the perfect and beautiful understanding which was between them, the peace and the happiness in their eyes as they regarded each other, and it made his lonely heart ache. Euphame Dempster had always been an attractive and eident gentlewoman; but there was something about her now, a sweet womanliness, which made Bruce feel that he could almost worship her.

The bitterness of that sad summer-time was now past, and she was blithely happy,

ready with her joke even over the impending law-suit—interested, too, most deeply in all Bruce's plans, which he found himself over the teacups discussing with as much freedom as at the Manse fireside.

By-and-by Mr. Bowman left them a few minutes, to see one of his people in the Airn village, and Bruce did not feel at all embarrassed to find himself so left.

"Mr. Bowman will miss you very much this winter, Mr. Rymer," said Miss Dempster. "He is always saying to me he will be lost without you."

Bruce was sometimes blunt of speech, and out it came before he knew where he was.

"Will you not be going to the Manse yourself before the winter's out, Miss Dempster?"

Her delicate cheek flushed a little, and she laughed.

"Maybe; it all depends on the law-suit. Did you think it a terrible foolish step for two such old folk, Mr. Rymer?"

"I—no—I think it just—just splendid," cried Bruce hotly. "I thought, maybe, just at first, that Mr. Bowman might not be my friend any more, like he has been. Oh, he has been everything to me, Miss Dempster, since I was a bairn!"

"But you don't think I will rob you of your friend now?"

"No, I don't, because you're so awfully kind to me too, and—and I don't know what I'm saying, I believe; only there's some things a fellow feels, and when he tries to say them it's all up with him."

There was a tear in Euphame Dempster's eye, and with a gesture of infinite grace she stretched out her hand to him.

"I understand you quite. If ever I go to the Beild Manse, Bruce, there'll be a double welcome for you instead of a single one—that'll be all the difference."

From that day the woman who loved his friend and whom his friend loved was enshrined in Bruce Rymer's heart among his sacred things, to be cherished to his death.

It was early evening—"forenicht," as Beild folk called it—when they got back; and leaving Mr. Bowman to go to the Manse alone, Bruce went on to the east end to see some more folk. He said "folk," but he only thought of one, and went straight to Sandy Morison's house. Sandy, to whom Dod now set such an excellent example, was sitting in the chimney corner reading tit-bits from the *People's Journal* to his wife and daughter, who were cutting rags into strips for a new rag-mat. They were all blithe to see him; and Bruce, though he almost feared to look, thought there was a bit flush on Jeanie's cheek, as she shyly rose to greet him.

"We heard yestreen ye were comin', Bruce," said Leezbeth, "an' was wonderin' if the vera thocht o' the college was gaun to spile anither Beild laddie."

"Which means that you thought I wouldn't come to see you, eh, Mrs. Morison? I don't think I've done anything yet to deserve that."

"No; but ye had a shinin' example wast the toon," replied Leezbeth. "Bring ben the bottle, Jeanie."

"Not for me, Mrs. Morison. I'm beginnin' where I mean to end: the less I see of the bottle the next four years, it'll be the better for me."

"Fower year's a lang time," said Sandy reflectively. "Ye'll be nane the waur o' wan nip. Rin, Jeanie."

"Eh, Bruce, the Beild skule's no what it was, I hear them a' sayin'," said Leezbeth regretfully. "Ye'll maybe mak' mair siller, but ye'll never be mair liket than ye was here."

"I believe that, Mrs. Morison, and I'll never forget the Beild as long as I live," said Bruce quietly.

"We'll hope no, for the Beild'll no forget you in a hurry. That's a wummin, Jeanie. There's shortbreid in the tap drawer. Fesh'd when ye're at it."

Over the shortbread and the whisky, which Bruce merely touched with his lips out of respect to the "Here's to ye" with which his friends charged their glasses, they had a very friendly chat; and it was nearly ten o'clock when Bruce jumped up saying he must go, having still to look in on Marget Aitken, and some others, if they should not be a-bed.

All this time Jeanie had been gey quiet, working at her clipping, with her bonnie eyes downbent, but listening—ay, never losing a single word. As they stood up to bid him good-night and God-speed, he

looked straightly at her, and before her parents said bravely,—

"Will you come to the door with me, Jeanie? I have just one word to say to you."

Sandy took another nip and a prodigious pinch of snuff; Leezbeth smiled, not ill-pleased, and wrung the young man's hand again.

"Guid-bye, an' Guid keep ye, Bruce. Come back till's as ye are, an' blithe'll be yer welcome."

"I will, Mrs. Morison," replied Bruce fervently, and made haste to the door, where Jeanie, trembling a wee, already waited him. He drew to the door; but within the porch, about which the autumn-tinted creepers still hung, though but sadly, they were free from observation.

"Jeanie," said Bruce, with all the earnestness he felt, "maybe it is soon to speak, but I cannot go away without asking you not to forget me, without knowing whether there is any hope for me?"

Jeanie was silent, but could he but have seen her face his heart had leaped within him.

"Fower year's a long time, as faither says, Bruce; an' maybe—I'm no sayin' ye will, but if the college should gar ye look down on the Beild like Erskine Nicoll, what wad I dae then?"

"Is there no difference then in your eyes between Erskine and me?" said Bruce, some bitterly.

"Ye are not like Erskine now, Bruce; but

oh, I'm feared. It's hard on a lassie to be slichtit aince, let alane twice."

"God forbid that I should do that, Jeanie, when I love you so dearly! Won't you trust me a little, my, my dear?"

Then she crept to him, sobbing, and laid her head on his breast.

"I've aye liket you best, Bruce, I think, even when I thocht I liket Erskine; an' if ye dinna change your mind, at the end of fower year you'll find Jeanie Morison waitin' for ye."

So one more hope, the loveliest that can illumine a young man's life, was given to Bruce Rymer; and on the morrow he went forth to his new life, rendered strong through a maiden's love and trust, to make it the noble thing such life can be, and is intended to be made by Him who gives us all that is worth the winning here.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GOOD-BYE.

IF a man wants to cultivate the virtue of patience, let him go in for litigation ; but let him first consult the condition of his purse. The case of *Dempster v. Dempster* was lengthened and postponed to such an extent that Sir Ludovic became quite infuriated, only dourer than ever—more determined that the thing should be fought out. It was not settled till the spring, but the result was worth the waiting for. Sir Ludo's side won, and Gavin Dempster had to retire to his farm at Magus Muir to chew the cud of disappointed greed. So Miss Dempster, though not a great heiress, would come very well dowered to the Beild Manse.

Mr. Bowman was not in Edinburgh when the case was decided, but Sir Ludo obligingly telegraphed the result to him, and bade him be over at Wester Cairn by a certain time the same night to receive them. The minister was full of thought as he walked over in the clear, sharp March evening, being in truth not particularly elated over the result. What had he to offer her for all she would bring to

him ? Nothing, as he had said, but himself and his love. He was not therefore able to enter fully into the exuberance and jubilation of Sir Ludo, who was as proud as a peacock over the whole business, especially his own share in it. Miss Dempster was of course quietly pleased also, though rather compassionate towards her cousin, who had cut a sorry figure that morning under the judge's contemptuous summing-up.

Lady Leslie, kindly and thoughtful for the two, gave them a few minutes together before dinner, and it was then that Miss Dempster noticed more especially the minister's quiet, rather depressed air.

"You are not so pleased as I think you ought to be, Hugh," she said. "Tell me what it is that is in your mind. Maybe I could guess, were I to try, but you can just as well tell me."

"My thoughts are not difficult to understand or to follow, Euphame," he said. "I was but wondering anew at my own presumption. You are a rich woman now ; what have I to give you ? Perhaps I ought in honour to withdraw."

"Perhaps you ought," she replied, with a touch of girlish coquetry which did not sit ill upon her. "If you do, there might be another case before the Session—a breach of promise. Would that do the Beild minister much good, think you, or increase his usefulness ?"

Had she not been so sure of him, trusted him so implicitly, she could not have spoken so lightly. He smiled slightly, and, being

near her, bent his head and kissed her hand.

"But consider, dearest, my poverty. I am ashamed, not of it, but of my own presumption in offering it to you. It is a curious position for a man, especially if he be a trifle proud. They will call me a fortune-hunter, Euphame."

"I thought we discussed all this before, Hugh," she said, a trifle hurt, "and that we had dismissed it. I am the same woman I was before this law-suit was spoken of. Take me or leave me as you will."

Her proud humility, which only a woman who truly loves can wear with such a matchless grace, conquered him; and he took her to his heart.

"I will never leave you; only let us be married soon, Euphame—otherwise I shall never feel sure. I will be selfish for once, and think of nothing but what is going to make me happy."

"I am ready to marry you to-morrow, if you like, Hugh," she made answer, and he took her, if not exactly at her word, very soon after. They were cried in the Airn kirk three weeks from that date, and married from Wester Cairn on the following Thursday, Bruce Rymer tearing himself away for two days from his beloved studies to attend his still more dearly beloved friend. There never had been such a tremendous upheaval in the Beild; everything else paled before the excitement of the minister's wedding.

They went away for a month's honeymoon on the continent, and as the time drew near

for their return great were the speculations as to where the minister would take up his abode. If Easy knew anything, she did not let on; but the general idea was that Mr. Bowman was practically lost to the Beild. A grand fallacy that turned out to be, for at the end of the month the couple came home, and stepped quietly into the Beild Manse, which was just as it had been in the minister's bachelor days. It was his wife's express desire.

"Because you see, Hugh," she said, when it had been talked over, "I want to live just as you have lived, so that I can understand all those Beild years; and I want to learn to know the folk as your wife, and if we begin to make ever so many changes, they'll stand off from me, so I shall never be the helpmeet to you I wish and hope to be."

I shall not tell you his answer; maybe it was a foolish one for a middle-aged man and a minister, but the most of us suffer from that sort of foolishness at some period of our lives, and ought to thank God for it. So everything remained unchanged, even Easy, who had been sorely troubled in her mind, having grown to the Manse, as it were, and loving it as she could never love any other place; only she got a smart young woman to help her and to wait upon Mrs. Bowman when she required waiting on, which, considering her upbringing, was but seldom. We hear and read of homes which are like little heavens below, and sometimes smile thereat; but if such a thing is possible in this world of care and sorrow, it was to be

found in the Beild Manse after Euphame Dempster went to it. I shall not attempt to tell you what she was and is to Beild folk, because they can tell you a great deal better than I. But she made a great difference in the place after being a year or two in it.

For all this happened a good while ago, and if you go to the Beild—that is, supposing you know where it is—you'll find a good many things I have not told you about, though I might some day, if you care to hear more of that old-world parish.

To begin at the west end, which still reckons itself the best end, you'd find Binns and his wife getting some frail, Shoosan a good deal humbler-spoken than of yore. And you might see there too a big, good-looking, old-young man, if you know what that is, who is sometimes pointed at on the sly by the irreverent as "the stickit minister." So have Erskine Nicoll's castles in the air toppled to the ground.

Nanse no longer sits at her little window, keeping her soul green and her eyes tender with glimpses of the moss, and the sky which is the veil of heaven, because she has passed within it now, to the land she aye longed for, "where there shall be no more pain." Andra, sore hauden down with rheumatism, and more lonely than is known to any save himself and God, and the spirit of Nanse which sometimes abides to comfort him, waits "till the day break and the shadows flee away."

The solemn-faced married man is still in

the schoolhouse, and has a big sma' family; but he doesn't like the Beild any better than the day he came. You see, he will never get over the fact that he is not Beild-born.

Tam Pitbladdo still carries the letters, acts as minister's man, and keeps the shop, weighing as jimply as of yore. And he is just the same to look at as the day he carried up the Book to Erskine Nicoll, after having threepit with him in the vestry to wear the old gown. The Morisons, Big and Wee, flourish still; but Jeanie has gone away from the east end, leaving "an unco hole," as her mother says—a hole that'll never be filled. But she is filling, right nobly too, her place by her young husband's side in the great city where he carries on the practice of the profession which he loves, next to Jeanie, above everything on earth. The world is waiting to hear of Bruce, and it will. He is biding his time. He is a wise man who does not utter the name of Bruce Rymer before Erskine Nicoll, or within the gates of the Binns. It's a sore, sore subject there; for the "puirs-hoose laddie" has vindicated his right to rise, and shown that there are few obstacles which a noble soul, rightly directing its gifts, cannot overcome.

One thing you will not find in the Beild—that is a kent face in the Manse. For the day came when another and a richer parish cast covetous eyes on the Beild minister, and after much persuasion bore him away.

Not so far, however, but that he can still drive—and always with the face at his side

which has been to him a veritable glimpse of the love and goodness of God—to the old place to see the old friends.

There is none like the old, after all. What we have known earliest and longest we cling to, and go back to in love even in our dreams.

Always in my quiet times, when all is still, and I think of heaven, it is of a place where all those early aspirations, early loves, early hopes, will have their grand fulfilment. To Nanse, heaven was a place without pain. To me it is a place without disappointment, where we shall rise to our full height, and be the men and women of our earliest and our holiest dreams.

THE END.

